
Linnea's Blog VIII: Thirruvalla

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Tue, Feb 13, 2018 at 10:14 AM

Believers' Church



Linnea's Blog VIII: Thirruvalla

Arun is laughing on the railway platform: “They have already done it! It is one hour since the mission ended and they have set up a What’s App group for biblical storytelling.”

Arun is one of our hosts for our Thirruvalla mission. Four days earlier our overnight train had brought us out of Karnataka and into Kerala - the lushest, wealthiest, most literate state in India. We stepped out of the train to find Arun and Nissy and a delegation from the Believers’ Church College Hospital awaiting us, ready to take baggage and scoot us away to the college campus and our rooms on the upper floors of the Believers’ Church Synod Office building. A luxurious little Garden of Eden, the campus is full of native Kerala

trees and plants surrounding open air classrooms and meeting buildings.

As we disembark from the mini-van at the entry of the Hospital, we are greeted anew by conference hosts, who, to our great surprise, drape great garlands of Indian basil around our necks. The foyer of the hospital is storeys high and the only thing within its circular landscape is a giant golden Jesus. We are whisked away to enjoy Kerelan specialties like fried banana and pakora, as we are introduced properly to the team and to our host, Hospital Director, Dr George Chandy.

Believers' Eastern began as a presbyterian mission and re-shaped itself into a more Eastern Orthodox tradition. The synod office is the head of the entire Asian denomination - the Vatican, as it were. The Church was established many years ago, but the Hospital is new - and continues to grow. The Christian Church is well-established in Kerala, dating its origins to the arrival of St Thomas the Apostle. The Church's mission outreach is in the north of India. So, when I first looked at the 100 students who arrived in the audience hall for our mission opening plenary, I was perplexed: Nobody looked like they were from Kerala. And they aren't. They come from north-eastern states like Jharkand, Bangladesh and Bhutan. Slim, young, looking like the Himalayas, and with names like "Gladness" and "Obadiah", they have come to this college to learn to be local pastors, sisters and evangelists, all the while learning English.

Which means they will be taking on the challenge of learning scripture by heart in a language not their first - indeed, possibly their 3rd or 4th.

As I sit on the outskirts of the meeting room making LCD projections for each new plenary, I sometimes sit and watch the participants take turns standing to speak in Julianna's workshop circle. It is difficult. I can see who the students are who have just arrived at the college and for whom just the ordering of English speech is a big recall challenge. I wince: What are we doing here, putting these young people through this practice that we think is so great, but - honestly what do we know?

By the next morning, a transformation is beginning to take place in the small and large group. A young man who has clearly been suffering through English in all his communication has become dramatic with his body as he reaches for each phrase of our gospel story. Bravely offering to tell to the whole assembly at plenary time, he wards off all their boisterous attempts to call out the lines for him and sojourns on with resolve, ending with dramatic flourish. The room

bursts into joy - and he literally jumps down the stage stairs.

George Chandy explains to us over dinner that life for evangelists in these isolated states can be very dangerous. There are five states which are almost entirely Christian, but there are also five states in which a law has been passed to outlaw converting away from Hinduism. In certain states, Christian leaders have been targeted and killed. "Telling from the heart may be the only means left to us after awhile," he says. When you consider that ours is a faith known through its stories, I wonder if it is the only means that really matters, in the end.

We are invited to a "Kyrie Eleison" service on Friday night - in the style of Taize. A long campus cathedral is empty of chairs, floors covered, the room bathed in a pink glow. As we arrive, most of the floor is covered by young barefoot sitting worshippers, mostly young men on one side and young women to the right. Chairs are offered to us visiting elders at the very back, but I walk right past them to take my place with the Sisters of Charity, midway down. I feel like I just might need a little bit of worshipful care myself - and only sitting on the floor will do.

As the exquisite harmonies pour forth, inviting us to join in the singing from the heart, I am transported to a place of beauty and release. It is only partway through the service, when I become aware of the tiny sounds of guitar strings and mic clicks, that I realize that the almost flawless four-part singing in English, Hindi and Malayalam is not from a recorded track, but from a group of seated and miked singers at the front. I go to sit near them when all the others have left, at the end.

As the mission comes to a close, our band has become more energized, my Matthew 25 rap has hit the top of the Believers' Church charts, the young women and men have taken on a boldness in telling scripture that they definitely did not have when they first arrived. Our leader, Ron, is so moved by the energy and acceptance of biblical storytelling - and the large group that has stood to be commissioned as an ongoing guild - that he cries on stage.

Our team awakens on Monday morning to the seemingly sudden knowledge that we are all going different ways; it is over. Fay and Juliana are going to see the Taj Mahal (as one must) before they fly out of Delhi. Elaine, Bonnie and Barbara are going to spend a day on a houseboat in Allepey before flying to the US. Ron will head for some beach time and Kanyakumari - on the

southernmost tip of the mainland. Larry has a friend in Bengaluru. We all bid a sad farewell, all with a sense that something profound has taken place beyond us in these 2 weeks together.

David and I have the day. I have asked Idaline Prince, leader of the Kyrie Eleison group, if they have time to meet with David and Larry and me. And in the afternoon, we all sing together. They offer us Taize songs translated into Hindi, while I lead us in psalm responses I have written. It is an exquisite little bit of magic. Idaline tells me her young daughter went straight home and composed 2 songs.

That evening, Arun takes us and the director to the railway station for our respective trips out. The director is leaving for his commuter home (13 hours away) at the CMC Vellore, and we now head north. Nissy has texted that the WhatsApp connection has begun; Arun bears the distinct marks of the post-mission giddyness we have seen before. We leave biblical storytelling in their capable hands.

As the sun goes down, leaving us talking in the utter dark of Thirruvalla station, some power has gone out on our platform. No sign or light points the way to the next car for us to board. All we can do, as the train rolls in, is trust and ask - as always. We hoist our bags on our shoulders and leap into the nearest railcar door, light spilling around us as we pull ourselves up and in.

Linnea Good

"Enlivening Faith through Story and Song"

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Tree at early morning



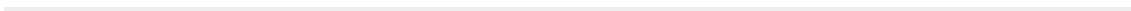
Student learn speaking by heart



A new biblical storytelling guild is born



Thiruvalla station in the dark



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