

Dignity through Service

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Motto is a village on an island on the river Sharavati 200 kms south of Goa, close to the sea. The only access to the town till a few years ago was by boat. It is a beautiful island with coconut trees and about 60 families, mostly catholics with a small chapel and a government primary school. The main occupations are coconut coir rope making and manually dredging sand from the river bed.

The rope making involves soaking the coconut husk for months in the river, then manually banging them to extract fibre and then spinning it into ropes where even the children have to help. After working from 5 am to 11 at night they sell the entire weeks production for 7 \$.

A Japanese aid organization worked through a local religious order to help this village in 1980. They sponsored education, health, residential schooling and general livelihood. Strangely after 10 years (around the time we went to that place on mission,) they discontinued all aid. They found that after all these years the people of this island were still with their hands outstretched. The money and the aid had not improved them in any way. They were begging 10 years ago and they were still begging. Their houses which were rebuilt after floods were still dilapidated, their children, especially the girls, were not in school. Some who worked were alcoholics and each family had a story full of misery.

Some children as young as 10 years were sent to work as domestic help in Goa and Mumbai as there was no food at home. The area was famous in Mumbai as a place where “servants” were easily available.

When we arrived there from Mumbai initially we were viewed with suspicion. They thought that it was strange that big city doctors could come to settle in a place like that small town. They thought we had killed someone in Mumbai. They did not realise that we went on mission because God had worked in our lives. That is a long story!! We worked in a small hospital for a very small salary but we got a chance to meet these people. My husband is a psychiatrist and I had worked in pediatrics but

we worked as medical officers and treated all sorts of diseases including snake bite!! We went by boat to the villages and slowly gained the trust of these people and they realized we are not “city” doctors.

We encountered them in the church also as we were involved in the catechesis there. Finally when they saw we were losing our life for them and loving them they accepted that we were genuine. We ate with them, our children went to school with their children and we all learnt their language. They slowly trusted us and the tensions eased.

The women who were pregnant especially for the second or third child were always ridiculed or scolded by the government hospital staff and even in the faith based hospitals. They were pressurized to undergo tubectomy at the moment when they were in labour pain. They were very comfortable with me because whenever they were pregnant I was pregnant too.

God gave me the grace to set up my own clinic where they were welcomed, treated with dignity and love, even if they could not pay me. They saw us struggle financially and they realized that God always provides. For them seeing was believing. God provided us plenty both in faith and blessings.

Many of those families joined the Neo Catechumenal Way in our parish. Slowly we realized that giving them an adult faith formation was giving them real dignity. They stopped drinking, sent their children to school, cared for their wives, became open to life and improved their houses or built new ones.

Today if you meet these families they are still living there but with large families. They will testify that faith gave them dignity and dignity helped them to get a better quality of life. We did not impose anything on them or tell them what they had to do. The regular contact with the word of God and the sacraments made it possible for them.

There were many instances when we saw families broken, spouses separated. There were many stories of procured abortions, children given in adoption to relatives by force, or abandoned. There was pressure on the husbands to work in cities or Arabian Gulf countries. This resulted in extra marital affairs, HIV and AIDS coming to these remote villages.

The government policies were also responsible since in India no one in a government job can get a promotion if he has a third child. School fees are more for the third child. I had a patient whose husband threw her out because she was pregnant for the third child and refused to abort. But with Gods help we found shelter for her and today the child is 19 years old and in college.

And both mother and child are active in the Neo Catechumenal Way. The husband got an attack of paralysis a few years ago. He called her back to nurse him and in a true Christian spirit she went and did it. When he got better he threw her out again. She is managing her life and works to feed herself and her child and send her to college. She has even built her own house.

There were a few instances when I had to go to the auto rickshaws outside the hospital to carry the new born babies into the hospital; the mother had delivered the child in the boat or in the vehicle while trying to reach the hospital.

The humiliation some of the women faced; they were too poor to do the blood test and no hospital was ready to deliver them. They were usually told, "There is this Dr. Wilma, and she will deliver you without any problem."

Over the years, we closely followed the effects of family planning on the families. The government Doctors and nurses had to get a certain number of women to be sterilized every month. To fulfill this quota they went house to house and sterilized even menopausal woman.

We saw the effects of tubectomy in women in all walks of life. Instead of becoming a source of life for the family, they suffered from a lot psychosomatic illnesses and were unable to look after their husbands or kids and even showed signs of premature ageing.

Today this village has been able to achieve what foreign aid could not make it do for years. At the end of our stay there (almost 18 years) that it was faith which gave them this dignity. When the hospital staff ridiculed them about being pregnant saying, "What? Again? Big stomach so fast!!" my patients would reply "We follow your Doctor. Why don't you tell her to stop?" They would giggle and relate the same to me.

This openness to life helped the husbands to run home from work to help out and not go to the bar. From being typical Indian husbands who only bother about earning money and not bothering about "women's matters" they developed a new relationship with their spouse. They would discuss problems together, support each other, transmit faith to their children and encourage vocations among them.

The collections in church from these poor people rose dramatically to show that faith had reached their purse and the mission Sunday collection in that parish is usually the highest in the diocese.

I could go on and on with this story. Maybe one day I will write a book on how God has worked here. I can truly say this is the power of the resurrection of Christ.

We moved out of Honavar in 2008 because we started on a new type of mission called *Missio Ad gentes*. This was based in Belgaum diocese. We left a comfortable house overlooking the sea and struggled to find houses and jobs in Belgaum. The fact that we are settled once again is an experience for the children to realize that it is not the parents but God who provides.

In Belgaum there are many HIV cases and a clinic needed a doctor. No doctor was willing to work with HIV patients, so I took it up. Working here made me aware of strange injustices prevalent in this region.

1. Devdasis: Young girls married off to the temple deities and made into temple prostitutes.
2. Prostitution: It is rampant since the last 40 years because of migrant labour.⁴
3. Abysmal lack of awareness of HIV/AIDS
4. Superstition
5. Child Marriages

The first death due to HIV/AIDS in India was in Belgaum in 1986. In Belgaum there are 13,657 registered HIV cases, of which 2402 died. 6676 are receiving active treatment in this month.

We face a herculean task of treating infections in these patients especially TB, pregnant woman with HIV/AIDS and HIV positive children with infections and nutrition problems. Women are thrown out by their relatives because they are blamed for spreading the infection. Women and children are exposed to sexual exploitation because of their attitude that “anyway I am going to die, let me be promiscuous.”

The HIV positive patients, especially women, find our centre an oasis in the desert of their miserable lives. They are treated with empathy, Love and a non-judgmental attitude. The dignity we give them keeps them happy. They have a hope that one day a Cure will be found and that keeps them going.

In Summary, the best practices I would suggest are,

1. To create awareness about the Dignity of Women and Respect for Womanhood in any given situation.
2. Give Women a chance their opinions on Matters of Life.
3. Faith formation helps families to develop communion, love and trust.
4. Discovering God given Dignity helps people to improve their quality of life.

5. Mature and Well-formed Christians can withstand pressures of Anti-life Government policies.
6. To end all forms of discrimination of all women, especially HIV positive Women.
7. Move to eradicate violence against women by giving them an equal dignity in society.
8. Education and Awareness to counter HIV/ AIDS and the Devadasi system.