

“See a Need, Meet a Need”
Celebrating 40 years of FOCI Mission
Friends of Christ in India

Mission Scripture Litany

Leader: “God said to Abraham, ‘Get thee to a far country... and all people
On earth will be blessed through You.”
(Genesis 12:1-3)

Congregation: “Jesus said to his Disciples, ‘go into all the world and make
disciples of all
nations...preach the Good News to all creation.”
(Matthew 28:19, Mark 16:15)

Leader: “During the night Paul had a vision of man standing and begging
him, ‘Come over here and help us’”. (Acts 16:9)

Congregation: “All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and
all the families of the nations will bow down before God.”
(Psalm 22:7)

Together: “Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of
your dawn.”
(Isaiah 60:3)

Prayer: Holy and Loving God, we believe that the Good News is to be
shared with the whole world. But help us to do it in Your spirit,
not ours; for Your sake, not ours; for Your purpose, not ours.
Amen.

The idea of a sermon is to take a particular and apply it to the general. For example, if I preach on “Thou Shalt Not Steal,” it’s not because I KNOW that you stole a stapler from your company headquarters, therefore I want you – specifically YOU – to confess, repent, and return the stapler! In which case, the rest of us can tune out the sermon!! No. I want each of us, me included, thinking of how we “steal” one way or another. We steal from the future when we abuse the present.

Someone may shoplift or underpay when the check-out clerk makes an error. Or we cheat, plagiarize, or short cut. Me?

You pay me well. You assume I’m working hard but let’s say, in truth, I sleep ‘till noon, play video games in the afternoon. I’d be stealing from you, right, from this church? So, my sermon would take a particular, “Thou shall not steal,” and apply it to all of us, the general.

Today’s sermon is sparked by realizing it’s been 40 years since I started our mission work in India; FOCl, F-O-C-I, Friends of Christ in India. It’s a mission project our church supports generously, and many of you, individually, also give generously. About 100 people from our church have visited the FOCl projects, you’ve seen our mission dollars at work. So today, FOCl is the particular. But you may have other interests. And not everybody knows about mission or is interested in India.

Once again, my job is to make the particular more universal, to make this thing – FOCl – of value to you.

Now you may say, you don’t care about mission, or even you don’t believe in mission. I’d say I don’t believe you! You may not call it that, but you do mission all the time!

On Election Day, you go to Dwight School, you vote, you walk out and buy Girl Scout cookies. That's mission. We have 7 or 8 bake sales after church every year for one cause or another. You buy a cupcake, or a pie, or place a \$5 bill on the table. That's mission. You make a donation to Bridgeport Rescue Mission. You drop off canned goods for the Food Pantry, or books at Pequot Library, you spend a week at ASP with Alida; heck, you visit a shut-in in a nursing home, that's mission.

When you step outside yourself, when you go beyond your own boundaries to help someone else, that's mission. It becomes "Christian" mission when you allow yourself to be motivated by Christ, when you choose to link your faith with your action. So, I invite you to take my particular, FOCI, and apply to your general – wherever it is you do mission.

OK.

Have you seen my sermon title? It's the best sermon title ever: "The Mispronunciation of a God-ordained moment." I'll get to the "God-ordained moment" later, but I end this opening with the "mispronunciation" part, FOCI. We call it FOCI. (For-Kai). But any of us who took Latin know F-O-C-I is pronounced "FOCI." (Foe-sigh). And when I began it 40 years ago, I called it FOCI. (Foe-sigh). But everyone kept correcting me, calling it "FOKI," so I gave up – FOKI it is...for 40 years of being Friends of Christ in India.

SERMON

Alida and I and our grandson went to Broadway on Thursday to see “Life of Pi.” It’s a terrific play with astounding puppets about an Indian boy who survives a shipwreck, 227 days in a lifeboat with a Bengal Tiger. When the boy is finally rescued, he is interviewed by an Embassy Official and an Insurance executive who need to know the true story of what happened that sunk an entire cargo ship and he was the only survivor!

Pi tells an amazing, phantasmagorical story full of ghosts and miracles, talking animals, and God, and nobody believes him. So, he tells a more plain, humdrum story. At the end of the play, Pi asks his interrogators which story they prefer?

Today we celebrate 40 years of FOCI, and I could tell you my own phantasmagorical story, or a plain, straightforward one.

The straightforward one would be:

Man goes to India,
meets nice Indian Christians,
they do good work.
Man decides to raise funds for them,
more good work gets done,
lots of happy faces.
True enough.

Or... I can tell you the story with all it’s phantasms. And you decide which story you like.

Mine begins with an unlikely, unwanted trip to India in 1983. I was President of Habitat for Humanity, International at the time, totally committed to Africa, 1000 personal connections to Africa. I promised you lessons for your life and your concerns based on FOCL, so here's lesson #1, courtesy of the Rolling Stones, who famously, and correctly sang:

"You can't always get what you want,
but if you try sometimes
you just might find
you get what you need."

Which is a better way of saying "sometimes you gotta do what needs to get done whether you want to, or not."

The whole history of Christianity, all the way back to our Jewish roots, is the story of people going where they didn't want to go, had no intention of going, actively opposed going. Abraham was ordered to go to God-knows-where. Jonah was sent to a hated, enemy country. Jesus told his Disciples to "go to all the world...to the ends of the earth."

Long, long ago I was flown out somewhere to preach at an ecumenical Good Friday breakfast, and my sermon title was "God is a Verb." My point was, the verb carries the action in a sentence, right? And that's God, all action. God is a sending God. God wants us on the move, in the action, outside ourselves. And it's not 'always what (we) want.' But it can be 'what (we) need.'

For me... I wanted to be in Africa the summer of 1983, but God wanted me in India. It all started with this really annoying persistent Indian immigrant from New Jersey, a Presbyterian minister who kept knocking on my door. Demanding, beseeching, weeping, badgering that I must go with him to India. I must help India. I must bring Habitat for Humanity to India. He wouldn't let go, he wouldn't take "no," so, I gave in, went to India. I was immediately immersed in a world of hurt:

Drought,

Famine,

Fire,

Disease,

Poverty.

Far off the beaten path, far away from the tourist sites, we were with everyday people, suffering in everyday ways. But I had this narrow focus: I was there to scout out the 1st Habitat project in all of Asia, yet every minute of every day God was slapping me silly, trying to wake me up.

"Look around you," God seemed to be saying, God was saying, "see the need... meet that need."

In fact, that's the 2nd lesson I'd pass on to you today. One of the foundational mottos for FOCI is precisely that: "see a need, meet a need."

FOCI has always been very simple, very streamlined, not structured. The person I started FOCI with, I'll tell you about him in a minute, he was the one who led his life and his ministry by that simple slogan: "See a need, meet a need."

When life, or God, or circumstance puts a need right in front of you, what will you do?

One night, after my first two weeks in India, I'm up late writing at a desk in the Bishop's House, in a city called "Vellore." I was wide awake, journaling, trying to make sense of all I'd seen, this world of need, this world of woe, this world of opportunity, this world of wealth. That's the world, right? Wealth, need, woe and opportunity, it's our world here, Fairfield; it's their world there, India. And God said to me, out loud...

I hope you heard that sentence. "God said to me, out loud."

God said,

"I want to start a mission project, call it FOCI, Friends of Christ in India, F-O-C-I, that's the plural of focus because you're to have two 'FOCI.'" Evangelism and Social Action. Evangelism is telling people of Jesus. Social Action is doing what Jesus said to do. And don't take a penny for yourself."

Well, that was a game changer, life changer, ministry changer, even family changer. My daughter married an Indian man. We have two Indian grandchildren. They've all lived in India the last 16 years. Alida has made FOCI one of the great passions of her life. Our church has made FOCI the centerpiece of our mission along with Appalachia and Bridgeport.

But the voice in the night was only a call. How did it become a reality? Shortly after that profound experience I met an Indian itinerant evangelist named Azariah. "Itinerant evangelist" meant he was on his own; no backing, no church, no home-base. He just went about, you guessed it, telling people about Jesus and doing what Jesus told us to do: evangelism, and social action.

When I saw what Azariah was doing with no outside help, for every human need imaginable, I had my FOCI plan: get him money, turn him loose.

He was the one who taught me “see a need, meet a need,” that’s the only business plan he had.

One year, he took me up to Delhi, India’s capitol, to the cremation grounds where Mahatma Gandhi had been cremated. You enter the grounds through a large stone archway, in which were carved these words:

“Before you take your next step, imagine the face of the poorest most wretched person you have ever seen and ask yourself how your next step will liberate that person.”

That’s mission.

One thing Azariah, and therefore FOCI, has been, is a way to open up avenues for caring in exciting ways, acting as a “force multiplier,” if you will. We see that in church life all the time. When the Dogwood Festival revived, it’s not just the Dogwood Festival that has found new life, suddenly volunteers were signing up for everything! With our 300th Anniversary and Capital Campaign, and our emphasis on long-term ministry and long-term maintenance, we are looking at our church with fresh eyes. With the strengthening of our music ministry, we find expanded ways to extend worship in creative ways! With ASP and its own 40+ year history, we see the benefits extend years and decades far beyond six days in July in West Virginia. ASP impacts career, life, and faith.

Well, likewise, FOCI keeps us aware, sensitive, dedicated, expanding, and deepening not only FOCI, and not only mission, but faith and church as well. One good thing does lead to another.

The first time I went to India, I met a very refined gentleman, college professor, quite successful. But the only thing he truly cared about was giving away free Bibles. But he also agreed to help us build Habitat houses.

The second time I was in India, I met a woman whose passion was literacy, the future of India depended on children learning to read, she said a million times. She also agreed to help us build Habitat houses.

The third time I was in India, the urgency was starting a school. So, one person wanted everyone to have a Bible. Another person wanted people to read. And a third wanted a school. It started to come together. You go to school, to learn to read, and you can read the Bible. So, what happened with the school idea?

OK.

The first Habitat project built 20 houses, creating a little community with lots of kids running around. Among the new homeowners was an older widow who couldn't even afford the tiny payment on a tiny Habitat house. So, we struck a deal. We would rent her house during the day, start a school in her house! Bingo! The community has a school. She keeps her house. As time went on, more houses, more kids, need a bigger school. All these years later, it's a proper, excellent academic success, and a family in our church just chose to underwrite it for the next five years... one of the convoluted miracles of mission.

Atheists say, you don't need God, Church, or Religion to do good. And they may be right. But God, Church and Religion have long been the vehicle and the excuse for doing good. Here in our church, FOCI has been a way to do exciting good. When the tsunami of 2004 hit the coast of India, a church family called the very next day and sent a lot of money to FOCI, and very quickly we were delivering fishing nets, food stuff, clothing, household items, to fishing families who had lost everything. Soon, that family established rural health clinics and fund a women's community center.

Another family gave us a wonderful Family Foundation grant to buy a bus, but not any old bus – a school bus, but not any old school bus – a school bus that was actually a school.

For many years, that school bus “school on wheels,” rolled up to squalid slum settlements to provide kids what we called “three hours of childhood.” This January, a young woman, now in college, came up to Alida and said, “You remember me?” She was one of those little girls, many years ago, who crawled out of her slum scrap-wood, make-shift little shelter into the bus each day for a little childhood and the only nutritional food of her day. One good turn keeps providing another, over and over again.

Which brings us to today, Sunday, June 11, 2023, just about 40 years to the day when God slapped me silly, told me to look around, see what needs doing, and get it done. What's the World of FOCI today? Tough, to be blunt. Tough.

Our work in India used to have three funding sources. One group from England retired from the field. One group changed their priority to Africa. Now, for all the people and projects

we care for, it's us or nobody. And the world of mission has changed dramatically. Most American Christians have lost interest in mission, it's not important anymore. Most foreign countries are suspicious of mission or outright hostile. India, China, the Middle East, that's half the world, are anti-Western influence, anti-Christian influence, strongly so. Any work like ours is under a severe microscope. It's tough.

And yet:

There are lepers who used to live under a bridge and now have a decent village for themselves, they count on us.

There are women who have found community and opportunity in our centers, they count on us.

There are children who are thriving and learning and dreaming in our programs, who count on us.

There are elderly people, without family or village, for whom we are their home, they count on us.

There are pastors for whom we are their support, who count on us.

There are mentally handicapped youth who have found a loving life thanks to us. They count on us.

There are churches and Sunday Schools proud and courageous in their faith who count on us to have their back.

Just Friday, two days ago, Alida wrote our Indian partners with a simple message, saying in effect, "Don't worry. We may be small; times may be tough. But God called us into being. And as long as we have breath, we're here for you."

Thanks to you.