

GREAT MEDICAL LIVES

FR GLEN FERNANDO AND LEPROSY IN SRI LANKA : A BRIEF REPORT

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Fr Glen Fernando 1940-2007

The name of Fr Glen Fernando, a Catholic priest, is inextricably linked with the care of persons with leprosy in Sri Lanka. He had a dream of giving joy to lepers ostracized from society because of their physical deformities and the infection they carried.

Fr Glen, who was intent in giving joy to his leper friends, was very sensitive to the fact that the biblical stigma of leprosy followed them like their shadow—a stigma that is an obstacle to self-reporting and early treatment. He was infused with the idea of spreading the new image whereby patients will not hesitate to come forward for diagnosis and treatment.

Leprosy is a condition that continues to be newly diagnosed in Sri Lanka. When diagnosed early, patients benefit from the appropriate treatment and they have a relatively successful outcome. However, there are many who suffer from the long term consequences of the disease.

A good deal of the field work is carried out by SUROL (the Society for Upliftment and Rehabilitation of Leprosy affected persons). It was inaugurated in 1971 and has been a highly regarded approved charity since 1973. It was greatly developed by Fr Glen from 1989 to 2007 and has since been an apostolate under the stewardship of the Catholic Archbishop of Colombo. The Board of Managers meet once a month to review the work and all financial contributions are documented and acknowledged.

SUROL is a society dedicated to the established of communities where affected persons are accepted as equal partners and fully contribute in the social and economic life of the community at large without suffering discrimination.

The work of SUROL includes educational training and rehabilitation so that affected persons are fully integrated in society. Currently there are 295 persons who are primary beneficiaries. No new cases have been accepted in the last two years owing to financial constraints. There are hundreds on the waiting list at present.

SUROL has workers in the outstations who regularly meet with beneficiaries. The beneficiaries receive financial assistance for purchasing food, milk, clothing and the purchasing of medical treatments, the renovation of existing houses or the building of new ones and the obtaining of water and electricity. A viable income generates self-help or livelihood projects so that they will be less dependent on others



for their needs. They will thus be accepted as equals in society.

Thanks to the assistance of SUROL, some family members of beneficiaries have entered institutions of higher learning.

Now that there is peace in Sri Lanka, the outreach work of SUROL has the potential to access areas that were previously difficult. The diagnosis of leprosy is made by medical specialists and SUROL can then give financial and other forms of assistance. SUROL has provided basic wound dressing items to beneficiaries including antiseptics, gauze, bandages etc.

The concept of "upliftment" relates to helping people affected with leprosy to gain a sense of self-worth. SUROL does not discriminate on grounds of race or religion. Current funding is from individual donors and from local and foreign charitable organizations. However, as noted above, current funding is insufficient to meet the needs of affected persons.

A typical service user might be Michael, a 60 year old man who lives in Jaffna with his wife and children. He lives in his own hut but there is no electricity. He obtains water from public facilities. His deformities include a right leg below the knee amputation and, with financial assistance, an artificial limb has been fitted. One son and two daughters have also been diagnosed with leprosy.

Kumari lives in Jaffna. Both her legs are amputated and financial assistance has provided her with a three wheel motor cycle. She and her husband have no accommodation.

Napila is a 59 year old woman who lives with her husband and children. The financial assistance provided was a sewing machine and she is now doing sewing to order and is financially reasonably secure. A little goes a long way.

So what did Fr Glen achieve? SUROL is now a well established and respected charity and there is enormous potential with appropriate funding for services to expand. Fr Glen never referred to patients as lepers. They were Leprosy affected persons. He always took the opportunity of boosting the self esteem of a leprosy affected persons. Seeing joy on the face of a leper was sufficient for him to withstand the many obstacles that were placed before him—a dream he implemented with the blessings of the Archdiocese of Colombo.

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With his maturity and moral stature Fr Fernando maintained an impeccable reputation, endearing himself to many. Whilst residing in the city of Colombo, the commercial hub where anything and everything can be done in anonymity, he helped the lepers throughout the island, from Point Pedro in the North to Dondra Head in the south, with no distinction of class, caste or creed. Due to his conduct he was able to move with the rich and the poor, in his own inimitable style, handling the many donations that kept pouring to SUROL to his dying day.

Fr Fernando knew the ramifications of leprosy in the land that he loved dearly. He knew how it is contained when times are good and how it rears its ugly head when times are less good. The irony of the disease of leprosy is that in developed countries with adequate sanitation and medical practices, it is nearly extinct. However, in underdeveloped and developing countries throughout

Southeast Asia and other parts of the world, leprosy is a fairly common occurrence still—unknown to the unconcerned in the rest of the world as well as in their own country.

“I was hungry and you gave me to eat—I was thirsty and you gave me to drink—I was a stranger and you invited me in—I needed clothes and you clothed me—I was sick and you looked after me—I was in prison and you visited me... whatsoever you did for one of the least of my brothers, you did it for me!”

This then is the legacy of Fr Glen, a man who was always interested in persons affected by leprosy and who would give his all to alleviate their suffering.

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THE CATHOLIC MEDICAL MISSIONARY SOCIETY IS THE CMA'S OWN CHARITY TO SUPORT MEDICAL WORK IN THE THIRD WOLRD.

If you would like to support SUROL, you can send an offering to the CMMS. Details at <http://www.catholicmedicalassociation.org.uk/announcements/the-catholic-medical-missionary-society>
