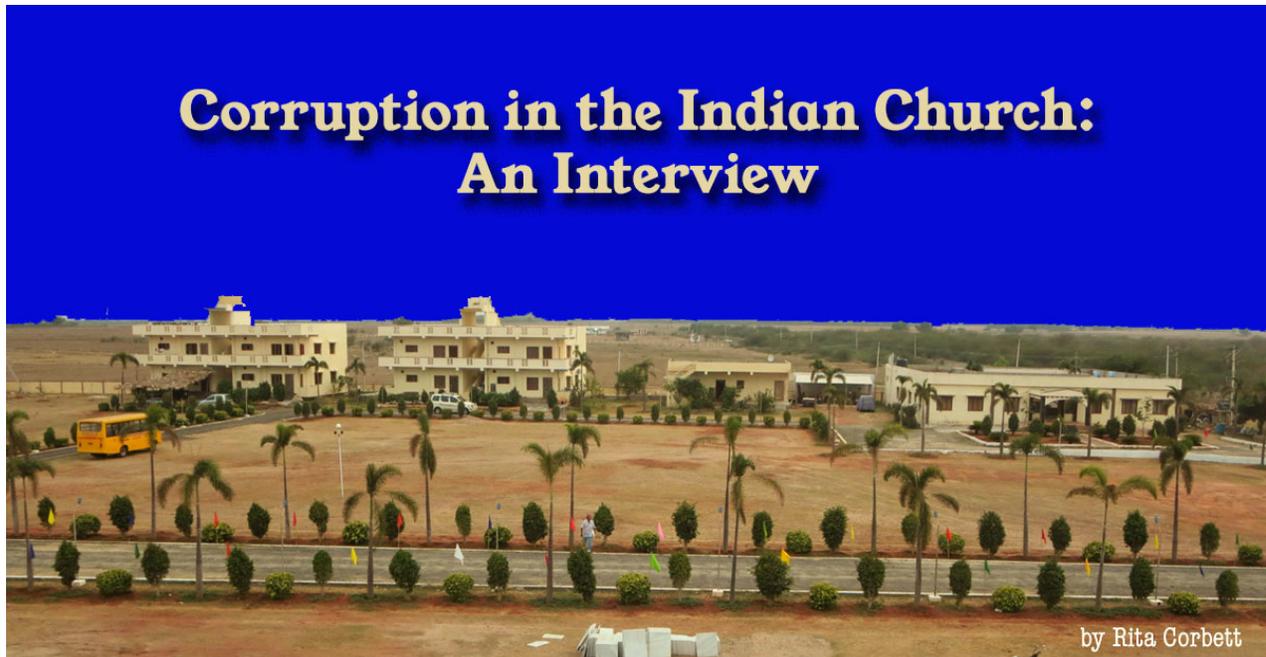


Hope Center Redux: An Interview with Rita Corbett



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In 2018, Rita Corbett told us about the difficulties they'd encountered in trying to gift a million-dollar conference center to South Andhra Section (Mission) in India. Recently we followed up with an interview to try to ... learn what has happened since.

Adventist Today: We first published [the story of the Hope Center](#) problems back in 2018. How had you tried to pursue this inquiry?

Rita: Hoping that transparency would prevent problems in such a large project as the Hope Center, we began with signed agreements with church leaders that we felt would help us monitor the process. In the spring of 2016, donors tried to get the promised records and documentation and obtain answers to lingering questions, so we could proceed with additional developments. We were stalled. Unproductive conversations were held later that year with Section, Union and Division leaders in India, and with relevant officers throughout the organizational pyramid. Donor calls for accountability received little response other than referral back to where the issues had originated.

AT: Did anything change after we were able to shine a spotlight on the problem?

Rita: Yes, definitely. There was some early anger that we had gone “outside” the organization, but the articles in *Adventist Today* raised awareness. Meanwhile, benefactors were puzzled by a

perceived defensiveness of church leaders, as they were simply trying to gift several developments to India. After more than two years of silence, through contacts gained as a result of the *Adventist Today* articles, an attorney was hired who had helped another Adventist organization in India, REACH (Render Effective Aid to Children), back to fiscal and administrative health. Sadly, our inquiry turned up even more than we expected.

AT: Because we have such a substantial organization in Silver Spring, it would seem that the General Conference would be glad to learn of this and address it directly. What has been the response from them?

Rita: We reached one person at the General Conference Auditing Service (GCAS), but even though 60 pages of documents were sent, there was no follow-up for at least two years. Increasingly serious questions were arising, particularly in light of government documents we were not told about, which stated that if certain actions were not taken immediately, the Hope Center buildings would be destroyed.

Donors were finally able to arrange a meeting with some GCAS members in the fall of 2018, and we felt they understood the problem. Some auditing in India was eventually done by GCAS and internal Southern Asia Division (SUD) auditors, but as it was apparent by then that criminal issues could also be involved, the donors' request escalated from a 3rd party fraud investigation to a forensic one. Neither was done. Early in 2019, information was received from a GCAS member that he couldn't speak to what may have happened to funds after they were transferred out from SERVSDA, and that he would be busy for some time. (SERVSDA is the receiving account at the SUD where funds were sent.)

In July 2019, documents were sent to the General Conference president and those GC Executive Committee members for whom email addresses could be obtained. Due to the threatened building destruction donors then decided that if additional communication was not forthcoming, perhaps it was time to talk with church members from India. Thus began preparation for the September 2019 meetings in Silver Spring (GC Headquarters) and Loma Linda (home of Members for Church Accountability). Many attended and over 6,000 have seen the meetings online.

After those meetings were posted, a letter came from the SUD President announcing a meeting on October 20, 2019, at the sponsoring church in Williams Lake, BC, Canada. One participant described it this way:

That event was the most demeaning and dismissive church meeting I'd ever experienced. There were excuses, strange claims, and intimidation, but no transparency, openness, or accountability from the visiting officers of the GC, GCAS, SUD, SDACC and BCC. A follow-up meeting held in the East Central India Union arrogantly brushed everything aside, saying they were being supported by the GC and SUD, and being treated by donors as thieves and criminals. It would be hard to avoid terms such as cover-up and complicity in what is now understood. If serious corruption and worker abuse are as widespread as is now believed, a true emergency exists. And elections loom in the SUD and GC.

A Maryland lawyer who has dealt with the General Conference was contacted to help donors speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) without hurting persons or organizations. What the lawyer claimed was devastating. He said the General Conference has a bad reputation in Maryland, that it tended to throw money at issues, and delay to the emotional and financial exhaustion of complainants. Given the problems Hope Center is facing, his recommendations were to approach the Attorney General for Maryland or the IRS.

AT: Corruption in the Indian church isn't just an Adventist problem. [Multiple articles from nearly every Christian group in India try to address widespread corruption, stealing, nepotism.](#) Why is it that our denomination isn't taking this as seriously as others are?

Rita: Part of the issue may be that we are not good at accountability. Though I don't much like the word "enforcement," we are weak in that. Love and forgiveness abound, but there are still consequences. Mistakes, even some intentional wrongdoing, can all be worked with. But it seems the SUD is at a point where powerful ringleaders are in total control and honest workers are leaving.

Those who do not fall in line with leaders in India may be severely abused. Because of the lack of options for workers and members to achieve redressal or access a safe channel for help, strong organizational directives will need to come from the top. To be specific, unless the GC and GCAS and other departments take responsibility for oversight, I believe in time the church in India will seriously run afoul of the government. Degree fraud at Spicer College has already attracted national attention.

AT: What has been the response from India?

Rita: On the part of Indian church leaders, misinformation and outright lies have occurred, along with ignoring signed agreements and calls for help. Documents promised have never been received. But since September, there has been a huge response from members, and [thousands have viewed the video online.](#)

A very high percentage of comments support the donors' purposes as shared with GCAS in 2018: 1) increase trust in the organization, 2) return misappropriated donations in trust to benefit India, and expenses, and 3) deal with worker mistreatment. Even now the Hope Center is producing hope that the future can be better. Email is pouring in from all over the Division, claiming similar problems and expressing hope that if the Hope Center is cleaned up, other situations can also benefit so gospel efforts can move forward. The church there appears paralyzed.

At the Silver Spring meeting, about 40 persons with Indian background attended. There were some with officer relatives in India who seemed to want to dominate the meeting, saying that donors are destroying the church. It was shocking for the India Supreme Court advocate Mr. Abhaya Kashyap (the inquirer) and myself to hear several say that if it were known they were at that meeting, their relatives in India could be in danger. This problem has some pretty long tentacles!

In Loma Linda about 40 attended, with half originating in India. Prior to that meeting a threat was received in an apparent attempt to intimidate us and disturb the meeting. We did not respond to it, but rather closed the Q and A portion early when some arose to make angry accusations.

We do have allies in the Indian church, who are weary of what they perceive as a long-established pattern of corruption (30–40 years). The church seems polarized into officers who hold power through corruption, and workers who are powerless yet faithful. The coercion of some workers has been horrific.

AT: Hope Center is the situation you know the best, but how much farther does the corruption in the Indian church go?

Rita: We have tens of thousands of emails, a roomful of documents, numerous file boxes in safe storage, a collection of stories of oppression that cannot be shared due to danger, copies of coerced statements, admissions of baptismal number falsifications, reports of officers living and owning far beyond their means, records of improperly registered properties, evidence of widespread lack of adherence to Indian financial law, names and stories of desperately mistreated workers, and a whole list of illegal, unfair, and evil practices. The farther the inquiry extends, the worse things look, and the higher the level at which tolerance exists.

Sadly, the Adventist Church in India is being closely watched by multiple Indian government departments, including those related to finance and human rights, and there is an explosion of court cases pending against the church.

AT: If you could outline something simple to address this, what would you suggest we need to do?

Rita: My limited scope leads me to try to distill matters into two simple things: kindness and integrity. Kindness would take care of the worker pain, and integrity would restore the church reputation in India, diminish government involvement, obliterate fiscal issues, create a law-abiding organization, dictate sound business practices, and eliminate gross unfairness. Caste and connections would no longer be a driving force, and neither would greedy dishonesty. [Here is an excellent article about efforts by other Christian groups around the world to confront church corruption.](#) I wish our denomination would also take this seriously.

AT: What would you tell people now who are approached to fund special projects for the Seventh-day Adventist work in India?

Rita: We worked with church officers about the Hope Center for at least 10 years, and until fairly recently, they seemed trustworthy. But obfuscating is a well-practiced skill, and leaders beyond the Section appear to hide corruption rather than preventing it.

Another church-supportive organization, [REACH](#), after considerable expense and trouble with internal leadership, is now a shining operation. It was a long, uphill battle, and people have gone to jail.

For donors who have approached us with questions about fiscal safety, we have suggested they wait to see if the General Conference is going to deal with the Hope Center issues. Our October experience didn't make us optimistic, but we keep praying.

We now believe that for a project to succeed, there would need to be an outside presence not connected to the church, on the ground, at any development. This would be costly, but it may be necessary. A legal firm would also be needed to guide donors through the purchase and registration process—something that is still not complete at the Hope Center, because the land title was not properly obtained. Documents show that Hope Center land is owned by an officer, and not the church at all—another agreement contravention. The SUD Secretary recently stated that over 80 Division properties are being handled the same way as Hope Center land. We have been given rather conflicting information—that “this is normal procedure in India,” and that “officers involved will be punished.”

Here's our current understanding of where things stand:

- The organization is attempting to get government help in Andhra Pradesh so illegally acquired land can be registered.
- Attempts have been made to block Hope Center donor travel to India. (A court case has been initiated by Indian church leaders against me for a visa violation—the very visa they told me to apply for—with the full knowledge of some who came to the October meeting in Williams Lake!)
- The Indian church leaders are not honoring the agreement they signed with us.
- The General Conference is supporting leaders in India who appear to be the kingpins of corruption.
- We are not aware of any outside fraud or forensic audit being conducted.
- Worker abuses continue.

Why wouldn't church leaders collaborate with dedicated members who love the church, instead of treating them as enemies? Problems will always exist, but widespread tolerance of bullying, irresponsibility, and corruption could and should be brought to a halt. In the donors' opinion, this could only happen if specific, drastic, open action comes from the General Conference.

The statements in this interview, of necessity, must be given with the understanding that they are merely opinions, and given without prejudice to a case filed in India.



Having grown up on an African mission station in Zaire, Rita (Schaffner) Corbett jumps at any chance to be involved in a church development and health-education classes overseas. Her husband, Grant, is an orthodontist, and they have 6 children, 4 of whom are adopted and are the colors of the rainbow. Rita is very involved in her home church in Lake Williams, British Columbia, and teaches family health classes.