

Adventist *Today*

The Sad Saga of the Hope Center



by Rita Corbett | 8 April 2018 |

The story I'm about to tell is a difficult one, with many loose ends remaining, and I'm reluctant to tell it.

I'm a lifelong Seventh-day Adventist, a missionary's child, and I love this church. When an opportunity arose to help out with a major project in India, my husband and I were excited! What has happened since, however, has made us wonder whether we did the right thing to invest in the Hope Center in the South East Andhra Conference.

In 2006 I began working with local church officers and numerous Gospel Outreach volunteers in South East Andhra Conference. At the time, we thought the conference's organization was effective. We saw a lot of evangelism, and we wanted to help them to do more. We asked, "What does this part of India most need?" Conference president John Victor Chinta and treasurer Y. Subhakar Rao said that having to rent buildings for conference offices depleted their resources.

How about building up a conference center? Together we envisioned a multi-purpose conference center with offices, staff residences, a training center and school. Our vision was to offer programs to benefit the local villagers socially, mentally, physically and spiritually. We would call it the Hope Center.

We made contact with church entities on both sides of the ocean to ascertain if such a project was feasible. Prospective donors included former missionaries, mission-minded small groups, and Adventist business persons. We consulted Ron Watts, a former British Columbia Conference president then working in India. The program had blessings from all sides. The Southern Asia Division (SUD) and the East Central India Union (ECIU, one of 3 unions in India), agreed to contribute an administration building if land were purchased.

One stipulation of the British Columbia Conference, as required by Canada Revenue Agency (Canada's equivalent of the IRS), was that an agreement be made between the sponsoring non-profit agency in Canada and overseas project leaders. This standard document spelled out what kinds of accountability would be expected from both sides. I was appointed as representative for the project. It would be sponsored by the Williams Lake Seventh-day Adventist Church, which would also accept and disburse the funds. Signatories included the church treasurer and myself, as well as the South East Andhra Conference president and treasurer.

The first order of business was to buy a 10-acre parcel suitable for long-term development. When I was shown the purchased property, it was only five acres. Still, conference leaders said, the property was "ideal", and land had been costlier than they'd expected. The size seemed sufficient, so we didn't question it; after all, they know how to do business in India better than we do!

At that point we hadn't been told about the difference between purchased land and assigned land, which is land belonging to the villagers as heritage property. Assigned land cannot be sold except in particular circumstances. That this piece of land was from the latter category was not revealed to donors until many years later, a fact that still remains a threat to the project.

At each subsequent stage in the plan, estimates for the next step would be handed to me during the agreement-required annual visit. Amounts could be sizable, often between \$35,000 and \$100,000 CDN. In addition to land and building costs, smaller amounts were sometimes requested for medical supplies, surgeries, bicycles for pastors, church buildings and parsonages, items for health clinics, evangelistic campaigns, and motorcycles for organizational supervisors. Eventually we backed away from some of these additional items, deciding we wanted to focus on finishing the Hope Center buildings without delay.

Problems and a Meeting

Initially things appeared to be going well. The first hint of trouble came when we were alerted that an employee who was in some unrelated difficulty had documentation that, he claimed,

showed dishonest use of funds designated for this project. (He had presumably collected these documents to protect his own job.)

At that point, all we had were rumors. But we became increasingly suspicious when, in response to our questions, we couldn't seem to get straight answers or financial records from the leaders we had trusted to build the Hope Center. Finally on July 25, 2016 we received an email from then conference president (now union president) John Victor Chinta, stating that the Hope Center had "no land and finance issues."

Yet his assurance continued to be contradicted. Increasingly serious questions about project integrity came our way, from questions about the land purchase, to registration, building permits, and conflicts with the local authorities. Notices were forwarded to us from government entities, including a frightening warning that the buildings would be destroyed if the land issues weren't resolved and proper building permits obtained.

My next visit was planned for December of 2016, during which I had arranged a stopover in Delhi to meet with division leaders to thank them for their support of the project. Because we now had so many unanswered questions, I prepared a detailed presentation for that meeting. Those present included the SUD president Ezras Lakra, treasurer Selvin Moorthy, secretary Dr. M. Wilson; union president (formerly South East Andhra Conference president) John Victor Chinta, and the former and current treasurers of the South East Andhra Conference, Y.S. Rao and K. Prasad.

In my presentation I was very clear that I didn't want to cast blame, but to find a remedy that would minimize damage to the project and to the reputation of the church. Documents that were required by the agreement, and that were so necessary for our relationship with both our donors and Canada Revenue, were urgently needed.

We did not receive the documents from the brethren then, and have received none since, despite repeated requests to all levels. Any documents received have come from sources other than church officers.

However, in the meeting a troubling suggestion was floated. If I would quit asking questions and just sign off on the finances of the project so far, the plans we'd had for the Hope Center could then be continued. This smacked of developmental blackmail.

At the same time, South East Andhra Conference officers pled that they were inexperienced and therefore confused by the land and building proceedings. That claim did not ring true to us, especially since during the Hope Center development the man who is now the Southern Asia Division president, Ezras Lakra, had been the head of the India Finance Association, the denominational entity that is charged with holding and managing all church property titles within India. Why not ask for help from the experts?

Although Mr. Lakra attended the December 2016 meeting, he spent the majority of the time on his phone, not participating in the meeting nor answering questions. It felt to us like he wasn't taking us very seriously. The meeting ended with no evident concerns on their part, and no plan. And of course, no documents.

The denials and excuses didn't stop the current South East Andhra Conference Treasurer Mr. Prasad from asking me, near the end of that same visit, for a great deal more money which he said he needed to correct the legal and financial problems with the Hope Project—problems which his superiors had told us not long before didn't exist!

The Situation Now

At best, the recipients of our donations have not met the reporting expectations of the accountability agreement they signed; more likely there has been a misuse of funds, and possibly fraud. We've brought our concerns and documentation requests to all levels of church leadership, up and down the organizational pyramid on both sides of the ocean: from our supportive local church and British Columbia Conference, to legal entities for the Canadian Union and North American Division, the General Conference President's office and the GC Auditing Service, as well as division, union, and conference officers in India. When the issue was communicated to the GC President's Office, the response was that they would leave the matter with the SUD.

Beyond the local church and the British Columbia Conference, communication has come to a standstill. There is no offer of a plan to remedy this situation, or even to discover the truth about the threats to the project that we've documented. Meanwhile, scores of emails keep coming to us from other sources that seem to indicate that the shady practices we encountered may be widespread. At this point we are refusing new donations to the project because their usage cannot be validated. Further development was planned, but is not possible under the present circumstances. The Lake Williams congregation has dissociated itself from the project.

Outside sources have requested information; we received an email from the *Boston Globe* Spotlight division, which in the past investigated abuse in the Catholic Church.

Of particular concern to us is the church's relationship to Canada Revenue and the Internal Revenue Service. Will this reflect on the denomination's reputation with these entities? Canada Revenue can, and has, pursued reports of non-profit fraud.

Of course, problems still exist with local Indian authorities. On February 12 of this year a government notice I was sent a copy of said *"You have constructed buildings in Vallur Grama Panchayat without Grama Panchayat permission. We issued notice in the past. Then you informed Grama Panchayat in written form on 2.04.2015 that you would construct buildings only after taking permission from Grama Panchayat. But so far you have not produced any document to Grama Panchayat for permission. Therefore, on receiving this notice, within 7 days you need to submit concerning documents to Grama Panchayat. If not, it is to let you know that Grama Panchayat will take legal action against you."* This may be related to our having

purchased *assigned* village land, which is usually not sold and then only in very special circumstances. If this is what happened, we may have stolen from the very people we were sent to redeem. If such land is found to be fraudulently obtained, I have been told it is subject to being restored to the rightful owners, which may be the legal action that is threatened.

Rumors and Fears

In trying to understand the situation, I contacted several other charitable nonprofits that worked with the Adventist church in India. We heard stories that were duplicates of ours, and some even more shocking. While none of us object to Indian church leaders seeking money from donors abroad—indeed, we feel it is necessary for us to be generous—many reported strong resistance to any ongoing accountability once a project was begun, and consequences to those who tried to insist on project integrity.

Since then, rumors have come to us that I am hesitant to repeat, yet I fear them enough that I feel I should. Trusted sources have told us of Indian church leaders who have far more money to spend than can be accounted for by their salaries, including enough to purchase various properties. One of my pastor friends was told by an officer that the conference didn't have enough money to help him with housing (local pastors are sometimes treated very poorly) then added, "Just wait until you get into leadership—your money problems will be over." Another pastor told me candidly that because of the degree of corruption that is reputed to exist among church leaders, they have lost moral authority to enforce church standards or discipline.

A friend I trust in India interviewed a Hindu contractor who had built much of the Hope Center. In addition to noting that the building costs reported to us were inflated above what he'd been paid, the builder also said that he was asked to sign the completion certificates without the final amounts written in—in other words to apply his signature on blank certificates so that later any amount could be written in. His concerns have been recorded, and he is willing to come forward with his testimony. This businessman, a non-Christian, called the church leaders he worked with "crooks." According to the interviewer, he "many times told the officers not to indulge in dishonest billing, etc., under his contract."

Lessons Learned

Could we donors have handled this better? The efforts of the Williams Lake SDA Church have been unimpeachable, though in hindsight there are things we would do differently. When estimates were received and payouts made, discussion with builders and the comparing of all documents for each expenditure might have helped. At this late date those documents might not reveal the whole story even if we could access them: the estimates and payouts would align, camouflaging what was actually taking place.

As I said, we tell this story reluctantly. We are aware that we in the West are far richer than those in the organizations we sought to help. The donors will not be put out of house and home because of their willing contributions. But we have become disillusioned by our experience. This

story is shared, at least partially, to call for more serious auditing and attention to accountability in the denomination, as well as to warn those like us who make substantial donations to projects where accountability may be cleverly circumvented.

Mostly, we grieve for the lost effectiveness of the church's message in Southeastern India. What about the salvation of those who may have orchestrated fraud or embezzlement? What of the ensuing loss of outreach interests? What of the abused rank-and-file pastors, left to celebrate our great hope in unspeakably difficult circumstances?

It was expected in the first place that leaders would be honest, and that when there were problems, they would be honorable. Sadly, in the case of the Hope Center, we fear neither has been true.



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 in the community.