



## Donors Initiate Legal Inquiry into the Hope Center

by Rita Corbett | 1 November 2018 |

The story of Hope Center is a story of committed members who joined hands to build a conference center to promote the message of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Andhra Pradesh, South India. It now seems that in the larger frame of things that God alone knows, what emerged alongside the new conference center was a picture of the church in that region that operates at cross purposes to the basic principles of the Bible. Deviations from Biblical counsel appear at multiple levels, and motivations vary from petty individual gain, to being serious enough to threaten the church organization itself.

What happened **has already been reported in some detail**. Our desire had been to create something the church in India could be proud of, and that would further the work of God: a permanent campus for the educational and evangelistic activities of the South East Andhra Section. It began with an agreement between the Williams Lake Seventh-day Adventist Church and the South East Andhra Section (Conference) of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Pursuant to the agreement, donors released funds for the purchase of ten acres of land. When they arrived in India, they were told a plot of five acres had been identified as preferable. When complaints and rumors started filtering in, we could get no itemized accounts of the expenses, nor were the expected instruments for securing the land, such as title documents, available. We began to see notices from Indian authorities complaining that building was happening without government permission.

Most distressing to us: the notices claimed that the land on which Hope Center stood was village land that could not legally be purchased.

Our requests for legitimate documentation, instead of resulting in an inquiry against the miscreants, resulted in complaints against the donors. Systemic monitoring by state authorities of illegal Hope Center activities were reportedly countered by complaints against the donors from the very officers who had cheated the church, with what appeared to us to be meticulous intent.

Because our desire to see the church grow in Andhra Pradesh hadn't changed, we didn't give up and walk away, but asked for an audit. We were told that an internal audit was conducted and that it found no irregularity, though we never were allowed to see that report.

It was then that our donors decided to engage a private legal professional, an attorney registered with India's High Court, to conduct an independent inquiry into the matter. What we have recently discovered has taken away the remaining doubts we donors may have had about whether there was corruption in the Hope Center project, and has led us to fear that the Hope Center is merely one episode in a pattern of such actions.

### **What the Independent Researcher Found**

- 1 Five acres of barren land was represented to us as ideal property and acquired instead of the expected ten acres. This land belonged to poor landless laborers, assigned to them by the government to better their lot. One condition of assignment is that neither they nor their successors can sell the land.
- 2 Indian church officials told us they had spent a substantial amount of donated money to buy this land. Actually, we now have evidence it was likely acquired by spending a pittance of a few thousand rupees to create illegal documents.
- 3 We were told that the land was acquired by the church under what was termed a "gift deed." Our copy of this gift deed clearly states it is being transferred to the conference free of any cost. But our inquiries revealed that this particular kind of gift deed has no legal status. To prove the point, one of the donors was able to acquire a gift deed giving her the Taj Mahal!
- 4 During construction false bills were created to inflate costs, as was testified by the contractor. The contractor now believes Seventh-day Adventists to be

a bunch of cheats, and declares that to everyone he meets.

## **Symptoms of a Deeper Problem**

When we donors asked Indian church leaders for accounting records and insisted upon transparency, it was apparent that leaders at multiple levels circled the wagons to discourage accountability.

Yet we were to discover that what has happened to our group is part of an oft-repeated pattern. The Jacob family of REACH International, who had raised considerable money for projects in India, in the end resorted to expensive litigation to get some clarity. An Australian donor who has raised or given nearly four million dollars for projects in India has chosen to simply walk away and stay away.

The modus operandi is simple: court an enthusiastic donor and then encourage the donor to remit money into the hands of church leaders. When donors ask for accountability, obfuscate as long as possible. If donors complain to the authorities about illegal activities, register complaints in turn about the donor to authorities, making it impossible for the donor to stay on in India. (After we began asking questions, one of our donors was followed by the secret police throughout her every stop in India. She had given her itinerary only to the conference office. She has understandably been reluctant to return.)

We have come to understand some of the societal factors that make these brazen actions possible. Money and influence play a serious role in church affairs. There appears to us to be an assembling of insider friends in positions of power, with official appointments made on a caste basis with considerations other than merit playing a major role securing a position. We see evidence of a “war chest” of money used to buy influence or silence.

We have also heard of maltreatment of pastors: pastors not being paid, and in at least a couple of situations, possible physical threats to complaining pastors.

Christians have an official minority status in India, and this is often enough to bulldoze civil authorities into not redressing church members’ or employees’ complaints. Still, the number of court cases against the church is growing and more and more often the church is losing. **Dishonesty** and **abuse** in church institutions is now appearing in the public press, with disastrous results to the

church's reputation.

## **A Call to End Corruption**

Our donors initially thought that the Hope Center issues were a simple case of local corruption and stealing, with higher levels of the church protecting the wrongdoers out of institutional lethargy and concern for its reputation. However, since our independent inquiry, which included extensive interviews and documentary research, we now believe that these problems are systemic and deeply rooted.

While General Conference leaders weren't directly responsible for what we experienced with the Hope Center project, we did feel that the attitude of some when we reported our discoveries demonstrated complacency and a desire not to know the full story. As recently as the Battle Creek ExCom meeting, GC leaders told us that they'd talked to Indian leaders who were attending the meeting, and had been convinced by them that we were mistaken, and that it was all a misunderstanding based on false reports from a troublemaker in India! We believe our independent inquiry puts that theory to rest.

The leaders whom we have identified say they have done no wrong, though the full documentation we have long requested has still not been forthcoming. To the extent that influence corresponds to membership in a particular region, we believe Indian church leaders have influence in the General Conference that forestalls deeper inquiry. There has been rapid growth in numbers in the South East Andhra Section—though we recommend a closer inquiry which we believe will reveal what both Indian church leaders and local pastors have admitted to us: that membership numbers throughout India are highly inflated.

Perhaps God has let the Hope Center reveal a larger problem so that corrective and preventive action can be taken both by the General Conference and authorities of the Seventh-day Adventist church in India. This is by no means a problem that only the Seventh-day Adventist church is experiencing: papers by [GlobalEthics.net](http://GlobalEthics.net) and the [Lausanne](#) show that corruption in the Indian church is being addressed by many religious entities working there.

We are continuing to urge a deeper investigation, as we fear unethical behavior may undermine the overall management of the church and even change the character of the General Conference itself. As Elder Juan Prestol said at the

Battle Creek ExCom meeting, “Trust is all we have”—and trust is precisely what we fear is disappearing unless due diligence is done to restore it.



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 Williams Lake, British Columbia, and teaches family health classes in the community.



# Adventist *Today*

A Report on the Hope Center Donors' Meeting with General Conference Officials

by **Rita Corbett**

Two years ago, donors to the Hope Center project were frustrated.

A group of us from the Williams Lake, British Columbia church, joined by friends from many places, had entered into a partnership with the Southeast Andhra Conference in India to build an evangelistic center. It wasn't until several years into the project that we began to suspect that it wasn't going as we'd expected: we had good reason to believe that a substantial chunk of the roughly \$1,000,000 we'd spent on the project hadn't gone to the project at all. Furthermore, what had been built wasn't on land with a clear title. [You can read the entire sad saga of the Hope Center here.](#)

After realizing this, our representative contacted many in the church organization on all levels around the world for assistance. One GC official looked at the 60 pages of documentation we sent him, though that didn't lead to progress at the time. Repeated requests to the GC president's office only yielded the advice to leave the matter with the Southern Asia Division—which had already demonstrated to us that it had no interest in pursuing it.

## **Turning Point**

[The report in \*Adventist Today\*](#), though, reopened the inquiry. Donors began again to try to make contacts not only in the GC president's office, but in offices of mission and finance, as well as with current and former GC vice presidents.

(Other leaders we sought help from, sadly, were less responsive. We received this communication from the office of the GC president on September 18, which we found not encouraging given that the Hope Center issues had already been simmering for over two years: “Thank you for the email you have sent over to the General Conference and regretfully we are not able to attend the meeting that you have invited at the time and venue you have selected as, the GC personnel is not available in the date you have selected since their calendars are filled up for months in advance and they have other appointments scheduled. Sometime after Annual Council is over, ... [and] the division officers are available, something could be arranged, but this will need to be mutually agreed upon with only the directly involved in the matter attending.”)

## **Our Meeting**

Recently we were able to put together a meeting. Invitations were rather flexible: proxies were welcomed if specific invitees were not available. Understandably, some were unable to come due to the short notice. On September 24, several donors and others involved with the Hope Center met with some General Conference officials. The meeting was congenial. They did a lot of listening, especially to a shocking presentation by someone who had researched this matter for the donor's group. This was followed by an exchange of questions. As explained in a previous article on the Hope Center, our inquiries seemed to show unhealthy deviations on the part of Indian church leaders from the moral and ethical business principles we were expecting.

The donors reiterated their desire for a third-party audit relating to a possible fraud or forensic issues in order to restore a trustworthy working relationship; for any misused funds be recovered so they could bless India as was their original intent; and that any gaps in compliance with GC procedures or Indian law be shored up so that the church going forward could operate ethically.

A strong mutual focus of the meeting was on solving problems in order to protect and enhance the long-term effectiveness of the church and uphold the values of the church. The donors expressed the hope that guiding principles in the Bible, and the desire of the church to operate with integrity and accountability, could also lead any who may have gone astray back to a higher plane of operation.

The seriousness of the situation did seem to come through. A current GC officer voiced that the situation appeared "mafia-like", while another said, "It seems to me that unless we get our house in order business wise, we will have a hard time claiming the high road in scriptural and theological matters."

## **Why We Went Public**

We brought the Hope Center troubles to the notice of the body of believers in order to seek solutions to lingering problems. This is, frankly, only part of a much bigger corruption problem in the SUD: since [we went public with our findings in \*Adventist Today\*](#), donors have received about 4000 emails and other communications from Seventh-day Adventists in India, most telling us that we are only seeing the tip of the iceberg. In our meeting with GC officials we made clear that we are aware of wider ethical, financial and worker distress questions, beyond the Hope Center itself. Baptism and membership numbers should not be manipulated for the purpose of creating power centers or financial opportunities. Operations should be in line with both church and government policies. Genuine qualifications should determine who wins leadership elections. Work policies should provide support and protection, and not allow for mistreatment of workers.

Why should these situations persist?

Simply put, donors are asking only what normal business practices would dictate. We want to see this matter through for the sake of the church and the salvation of many, especially those church leaders who are trustworthy friends. Justice and morality need to be restored.

Boz Tchividjian, a former sex crimes prosecutor who leads an organization that works with victims of abuse in Christian institutions, is quoted as saying that certain church leaders “feel almost invincible... They don’t feel like the rules apply to them, because they’re doing great things for Jesus, even though their behavior doesn’t reflect Jesus at all.” A powerful church leader will surround himself with people who are loyal to him instead of people who actually can and will hold him accountable, illustrating the danger that comes when a church becomes big business.

This seems to us to be what has happened in India. Clearly trust has been broken by leadership there, and trust isn’t restored quickly. Thus our request for audits, documents, receipts and reports to help set things right quickly in matters that need correction.

It isn’t clear to us how our contacts in the GC will be able to proceed on this matter, but we are hopeful that they will be able to help. Though one effort to add a [financial accountability discussion to the Autumn Council agenda](#) was politely denied, those with whom we met seemed genuinely concerned. What we don’t know is whether they are able to do the deeper digging into the matter that we would like to see.

## **Stop Giving?**

Reports from multiple sources have darkened the picture, illustrating the truth that we may “have more to fear from within than from without.” A recent statement from a former GC officer was unnerving: “I would recommend that: 1. All private groups seeking to invest monies in the mission(s) work at SUD, stop immediately until, 2. the SUD/GC establish a fact-finding committee to investigate how and why things went wrong, and 3. a report is published in Adventist Today and also provided to the groups that lost money in their good-hearted efforts to impact the work in SUD. What are the chances this will happen? . . . I’m not holding my breath!!”

However donors, as members ourselves, are not wanting to withdraw from winning people to Christ in South Asia. As the body of Christ, we are called to continue the earthly ministry of Jesus today. (1 Corinthians 12:27). The apostles were so Christ-like that their enemies saw their boldness and recognized that they had been with Jesus. We believe in future possibilities—but timeless Christian ethical values need to be implemented internally, and urgently. God calls us to pray “for kings and all who are in high positions,” and speak Biblical truth as Paul did in Acts 24-26, and we invite you to pray for the Hope Center and for the problems in the church in India.

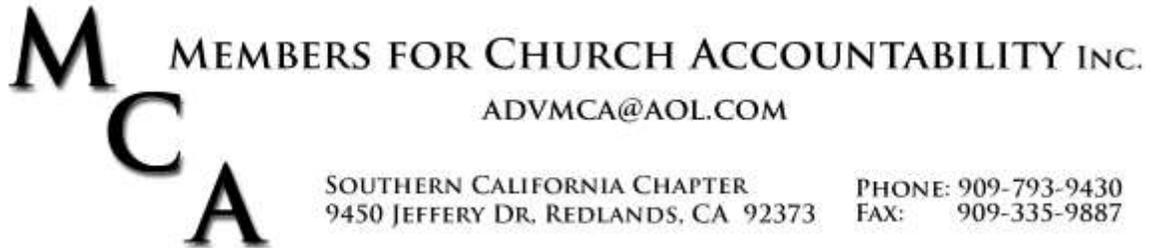
We are seeking a kingdom approach in our collaborative attempts to bring justice in the Hope Center debacle. We wish to avoid any additional tarnishing of the church and its officers. Compliance with Christian principles, General Conference policies, and the laws of India would be a good start toward bringing about long-lasting change, and ending what we believe are widespread habits of monetary mishandling and unethical business practices. The future of the

church in India may depend on it. It might not be easy, but if this counsel is followed, there could yet be hope for those alienated and disaffected donors who carry a heart for both India and the church.

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March 15, 2019

Ted N.C. Wilson, President  
General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists  
12501 Old Columbia Pike  
Silver Spring Maryland 20904

Cc Magdiel Perez-Schulz

Dear President Wilson,

Members for Church Accountability (MCA) originally wrote to you on May 25, 2018 concerning the Hope Center in India. You referred the matter to your assistant, Magdiel Perez-Schulz who responded on June 20, 2018 and stated that “the matter in India is presently under investigation including an audit by an international team of General Conference Auditing Service as such we are not in a position to respond further until the matter has been fully investigated”. Over two years previously, in September 2016, “the matter” was referred to the South Asia Division (SUD) whose president, Ezra Lakra, was a subject of the initial complaint. To label the events over the last 30 months as an “investigation” is ludicrous. **The requested** financial records were not available to the complainant for scrutiny, and in some instances, may very well not exist! Communication regarding difficulties was virtually nonexistent, and certainly not “transparent”.

The series of articles in Adventist Today by Rita Corbett exposing the alleged corruption among the ranks of SDA Administrators in India is alarming! Review of Mr. Schulz’s email exchange with Rita Corbett makes it clear that the two-year “investigation” conducted by the SUD was flawed from the start. It is no wonder that Mr. Schulz never responded to our September 10, 2018 letter requesting the findings and recommendations resulting from the “investigation”. Rita Corbett repeatedly requested a 3<sup>rd</sup> party independent investigation from all levels of the organization but was repeatedly rebuffed.

Members for Church Accountability (MCA) is an organization concerned with church accountability and transparency, and as such we were cautiously optimistic by the 2012 book, “Transparency and Accountability: A Global Commitment of Seventh-day Adventist Church Leaders,” by Paul Douglas, **Director of the GC Auditing Service**. The book received accolades from SDA administrative leadership as noted in the following quotations:

Seventh-day Adventist Church officers said, “A new book promoting integrity among leadership will transform corporate culture within the church and inspire greater confidence among membership”.

“Top church leaders worldwide have pledged to embrace the book’s principles and model them back home. The commitment signals a move toward greater transparency, church officers said”.

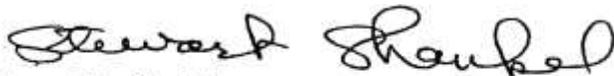
The book includes a code of conduct for: “Adventist leaders anchored in humility, integrity, trust, respect, accountability, collaboration and excellence; a thought paper on transparency within leadership; and best practices for organizational governance, local church leadership and financial administration. It also contains responses from church leaders on how to “promote, model and support” fundamental principles of integrity”.

We recently communicated with Mrs. Corbett, who has received no reply from her query to GCAS on how to access information in order to assure her donors. In addition she was previously promised a report on the SUD audit, but recently she was told that, by nature, the results of the audit would be confidential and could not be shared. How does that revelation square with: “Transparency and Accountability: A Global Commitment of Seventh-day Adventist Church Leaders”? Transparency and Accountability among Seventh-day Adventist Church Leaders is effectively dead! Meanwhile, the investigator hired by the group of donors **has stated** that some very disturbing, far-reaching conditions have been uncovered. It is of note that the SUD is part of the General Conference, and not a separate sub-entity, a fact which has prompted us to again appeal to you.

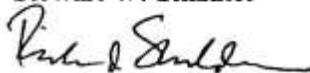
Douglas’ book could have truly been a guide to transparency and accountability within the SDA administration, rather than merely a cover for the unscrupulous. Such an ideal will never become a reality without leadership “from the top”.

MCA finds that the General Conference’s complacency concerning the alleged corruption among the ranks of SDA administrators is inexcusable, even more disturbing is the GC’s seeming complicity in the “cover-up” of this financial malfeasance.

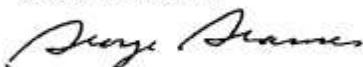
Sincerely,



Stewart W. Shankel



Richard Sheldon



George M. Grames