

The God of all Comfort

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord
Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion
and the God of all comfort,
who comforts us in all our troubles,
so that we can comfort those in any trouble
with the comfort we ourselves
receive from God.
[2 Corinthians 1.3-4]*

Our brother and sister believers in India have been through a torrid time due to the ravages of the Covid-19 pandemic, as I am sure you are aware.

And so it is good to remember that the God whom we serve is a **compassionate Father**, not indifferent to the suffering of his children, but actually suffering alongside us; that is the literal meaning of the word ‘*compassion*’ in English. The Greek word Paul uses in this verse indicates ‘*a deep feeling about someone’s difficulty or misfortune*’.

But the God we serve doesn’t simply *feel* deeply about the predicaments his children face; he actively *comforts* them. And as **the God of all comfort**, his comfort is sufficient to meet every eventuality his children face, ‘*all our troubles*’. The word Paul uses here for comfort is the familiar word *paraklésis*, the Holy Spirit himself being the supreme Paraclete, the one called alongside us to comfort, console, encourage, exhort, and counsel us.

One of the positive upshots of us experiencing God’s comfort and compassion in this way is that we can then share these gifts with other people - especially those who don’t as yet know the Lord and who have no first-hand experience of his amazing compassion and comfort, and who consequently are literally comfortless (inconsolable) when trouble strikes them.

So we pray that the very real tragedies, which have recently struck the Rebba family and others within the IREF community, will be an opportunity for them to comfort those in any trouble with the comfort they themselves continue to receive from God, so that many will come to know Jesus for the first time.

A Passionate Evangelist

On 17th April, we received the sad news that one of Emmanuel Rebba’s brothers, **Francis**, had died from Covid. Francis was a wonderful friend to so many of us, a true brother-in-Christ, an ardent evangelist, a loving father to Lydia, and uncle to so many more.

My memories of Francis, of which there are so many,

go back to my first visit to India in 1996. He translated for me at the Pastors’ Conference (which followed on from the main Bible Conference) when I explored the life of Jacob with IREF’s evangelists and Bible Ladies. He also translated for me at some of the village Gospel rallies in the evening of our second week – and on many other visits to India subsequently.



I looked out my old diary from my 1996 visit and was reminded that, on Friday 2nd February that year, we visited a village called Ponnur; IREF had never previously conducted evangelistic meetings there. I asked Francis to tell me a little about the village as we travelled out to it. He explained that the name ‘*Ponnur*’ meant ‘*the centre of the forest*’ as the village was in a thickly wooded area near the coast. He told us that in times past, unsuspecting visitors to a nearby village had often disappeared without trace. Curious and somewhat alarmed by this news, I asked him the reason. “*They captured them and then burned them,*” came back the disconcerting reply!

This was typical of the many stories with which Francis regaled us and which we enjoyed so much. How many of them were strictly accurate, we will never know!

I later wrote in my diary that evening, ‘*Our Indian friends have a wonderful way of reassuring us as we travel into these unfamiliar situations to minister the Gospel!*’ The visit to Ponnur bore remarkable fruit – about 30 people came forward in response to the Gospel appeal.

It was Francis’ love for storytelling that led me to sit down with him on one of my earliest visits to IREF to learn more about the origins of the mission. He was able to tell me about his father’s remarkable conversion and the difficult days his family experienced after Prasada Rao had given up his job as a teacher to become an itinerant evangelist, living by faith. I was able to write up my notes from my conversations with Francis to reproduce them as A Brief History of IREF for our UK supporters; the History is posted on our IREF(UK) website.

Francis’ great passion was to spread the good news of Jesus throughout the villages of his home state. He never lost his zeal as an evangelist. Earlier this year he messaged me about visiting several villages for

prayer, fasting, Bible teaching and evangelistic work. He held the village churches dear to his heart and had a remarkably detailed knowledge of the area. He posted a picture of himself presenting a Bible to a newly married couple in the Ullipalem church, whose pastor is supported from the UK, which was so encouraging to us. Sadly, that pastor also passed away last month.

What I will remember most about Francis is his kindness to all of us who visited IREF in India. He would often be amongst those who greeted us at the airport when we arrived in that wonderful country, and his beaming smile always made us feel welcome as IREF's guests. He was a lovely, gracious, warm-hearted man with a passion to make Christ known wherever he could.



An Ebullient Enthusiast

Within a fortnight of Emmanuel losing Francis, he lost another of his dear brothers, **Hyer Paul**.

I have nothing but happy, positive memories of Hyer Paul. I will always treasure his bubbling enthusiasm for life and his ebullient nature, and the way in which he welcomed us so warmly - and so often - as we disembarked at Chennai airport. His organisation of our travel arrangements up to Repalle, and our stays at the YMCA in Chennai, are legendary. I can picture him now, with a great wad of notes in his hand, settling our bill at the YMCA – and also the scenes of him frantically consulting all the noticeboards at the railway station to find our carriages and reserved seats to convey us northwards to Repalle.



One of my happy memories from my 2006 visit was stopping off at Hyer Paul's home in Guntur for ice cream, prior to catching the train to Chennai. Almost inevitably, because he entertained us so well, we nearly missed our connection in our dash to the station!

I will remember Hyer Paul as a true servant of Christ and of his people, a man who loved life and lived it to the full, a person who undoubtedly influenced many

during his fruitful life. We mourn his loss, but remember his personality and deeds, and rejoice that he has entered into his eternal reward with Christ.

New Sponsorship Rates

Remarkably, our Sponsorship Rates have remained unchanged since IREF(UK) was founded in 1996! So in this our Silver Jubilee year, our IREF(UK) Trustees feel the time is right to increase our rates for new sponsors, to bring them closer to those of our partners in IREF(USA). If any of our existing sponsors feel able to increase their contributions too, that would be most welcome! But we recognise that some may not be able to do so, and we don't want to lose any sponsors who cannot increase their giving. We greatly appreciate the faithful, regular, generous and often sacrificial giving of all our existing donors.

Here are our rates for new sponsors (you will notice that we have introduced a new category for Nursing Students):

Category	New UK rates	
	Per month	Per annum
Co-CDC child	£5	£60
CDC child	£10	£120
Repalle child	£20	£240
Nursing student	£25	£300
Teacher	£25	£300
Evangelist	£40	£480

Updated Profiles

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Indian Government ordered all schools and colleges to close back in April. There is no news yet as to when they might re-open. Only the Nursing Students have remained on site in Repalle since the closure of IREF's other schools and colleges.

John Rebba has been working hard to provide updated profiles of those being sponsored from the UK, and we hope to send these out shortly.

Some Prayer Points:

- Give thanks that Emmanuel and Dee Rebba, and John, have all been kept safe from Covid-19.
- Pray for their continuing protection and for others within the IREF community.
- Pray for opportunities to witness to *'the God of all comfort'* during this distressing time for so many.
- Pray that the number of cases in India will continue to fall.
- Pray that IREF's schools and colleges will be able to reopen soon for the new academic year.

Thank you for your ongoing prayers and support!

David Hunt