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EDITORIAL  
NOTE

This article is the fourth in the special series outlining how Seventh-day Adventists can share the Three Angels' Messages with important people groups.

# Sharing Jesus Christ with My Non-Christian South Asian Neighbors

The year was 1947. Elder Alfred Tarr, missionary from the United States, had two appointments: one with the Honorable Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru, the incoming prime minister of India, and the other with Mahatma Gandhi, former President of the Indian National Congress who had led the campaign for Indian independence. It was not the first time Elder Tarr had met Gandhi but it certainly would be the last—Gandhi died the following year. According to Elder Tarr, Gandhi surprised him every time they met. This time, Gandhi told Elder Tarr about his first encounter, some years before, with the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa. After the meeting with Elder Tarr, Gandhi accepted a gift from the Adventist Church, a copy of the book *Ministry of Healing* by Ellen G. White. Gandhi's secretary told Elder Tarr that Gandhi had heard about the book and was eager to read it for himself.<sup>1</sup>

Gandhi had a keen interest in health and was possibly impacted by the book *Ministry of Healing* by Ellen White. But Gandhi was no stranger to Jesus and Christianity. In fact, as someone outside of the Christian church, he actually provided some guidance on best practices for sharing Jesus Christ with the South Asian community. According to Gandhi, Jesus' example of suffering led him to adopt a nonviolent approach to life. He called Christians to a life of suffering like Jesus Christ. A second best practice by Gandhi is for Christians to see Jesus' mes-



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sage is for everyone. He stated, “If He were living here. . . . He would bless the lives of many . . . even [those who] never heard his name.”<sup>2</sup> A third best practice by Gandhi notes that Jesus did not preach a new religion, but offered a new life to all regardless of caste, class, or gender.<sup>3</sup> Gandhi stated, “You Christians, especially missionaries, should begin to live more like Christ.”<sup>4</sup> While this may seem like a rebuke for Christians, it was actually a helpful evaluation of how Christians were perceived by many non-Christians during his lifetime. And yet, Gandhi acknowledged that many of his values of life—the concept of nonviolence, loving your enemies, and lessons found in the Sermon on the Mount—came from Jesus Christ.

In the same way that Gandhi applied the teachings of Jesus to his life and the fight against injustices he saw, Adventists are well-positioned to mirror the life and teachings of Jesus Christ to the majority religion of South Asians. It is important to know that we cannot improve on Christ’s method: mingling, showing sympathy, ministering to needs, and bidding them to follow Him. The five basic principles for discipling a South Asian into Jesus Christ are embedded in Christ’s method.<sup>5</sup>

### **PRINCIPLE 1:** **Belonging before Becoming**

Becoming a disciple is truly a journey. “Belonging before becoming” refers to the stage before a non-Christian South Asian accepts Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour. Many models of discipleship assume that the person who is

being discipled has already accepted Jesus. However, most non-Christian South Asians do not have a Christian frame of reference for the God of the Bible, nor an understanding of Christian culture. In some ways, the South Asian culture and worldview are entirely out of sync with Christian doctrines.

Therefore, discipleship for non-Christian South Asians must begin before they accept Jesus and are baptized. They should be welcomed into the Adventist community and given the opportunity to taste and see that God is good. When South Asian families first experience the love and grace of Jesus Christ, the transition and discipleship process become more effective.

### **PRINCIPLE 2:** **Divine Encounter**

Many South Asians live their lives in fear of evil spirits. They practice a multitude of rituals with the hope that their families will be protected. Encounters with evil spirits are prevalent among non-Christian South Asians. However, many documented accounts reveal that many of these people are finding Jesus through healing and deliverance from evil spirits. Some are healed after praying to Jesus, and others are invited to follow Him through dreams or visions. Additionally, these accounts reveal that the discipleship process of leading non-Christian South Asians to Jesus often begins with a crisis. As a result, disciple-makers should present themselves as people of prayer. New Testament accounts reveal that divine intervention is one of many approaches Je-

sus and the disciples used in their ministry among different people groups (Matt 8:31; Acts 19:16). The Holy Spirit has been opening many doors of opportunity to connect and begin building friendships with non-Christian South Asians who need deliverance and who have already been delivered from the evil one.

### **PRINCIPLE 3:** **Connecting with the South Asian Worldview**

South Asians are very protective of their family and cultural values. Based on historical facts and prior experiences, many believe that Christianity is a threat to these values. They also have real fears about what will happen to themselves and their families if they convert. Therefore, it is essential for us as Adventists to become known among South Asian communities as a blessing and not a threat. The model of Jesus, summarized by Ellen White, paves the way for connecting with non-Christian South Asians in a non-threatening way. “Christ’s method,” as succinctly described in the *Ministry of Healing*, is a tested and proven method among non-Christian South Asians. As non-Christian South Asians mingle with Adventists, they are exposed to a biblically shaped worldview. Hiebert notes that exposure to other worldviews is an important step in worldview transformation.<sup>6</sup>

Many non-Christian South Asians desire to have a Christ-like peace that they see among Christians. Spending quality time with non-Christian South Asians in a non-threatening environment provides them with an opportunity to be exposed to Jesus. This quality time is fundamental to establishing trust. In practice, such a connection can be created in many ways such as: centers of influence in the community, prayer ministries

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that focus on healing (preferably in their homes or at church) as the Holy Spirit leads, inviting them to your home, or inviting them to special functions. Whatever the method, the goal is to connect with non-Christian South Asians in ways that lead them to direct exposure to Jesus.

**PRINCIPLE 4:  
Building Bridges with Non-Christian South Asians**

Every people group has its own ways of showing hospitality and its own methods of teaching its adherents. This is also true for South Asians. Hospitality is very important in their culture and is taught at a very young age. Adults

are expected to practice it and pass down these values to the next generation. According to South Asian scholars, hospitality is both a religious and social obligation. For non-Christian South Asians, entertaining visitors or strangers is nonnegotiable. It is taught that by showing hospitality to strangers or visitors, one will receive blessings.

In South Asian culture, friendship is formed when food is involved. As Adventists, misreading our South Asian friends' culture can lead to mistrust in our relationships with them. For example, if your non-Christian friends invite you to their home and you are offered food or something to drink but you refuse, your refusal can

be viewed as a rejection of their friendship. Thus, it is wise to be mindful of South Asian customs. Building trust among non-Christian South Asians takes time and patience. Once you have built trust with your Hindu friends, it will be easier to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

**PRINCIPLE 5:  
Studying the Bible with Non-Christian South Asians**

In general, most non-Christian South Asians are unfamiliar with the Christian worldview. For example, they most likely do not know the story of Moses or Adam or understand Christian terms such as "sanctification" or "justification." Therefore, it is best to avoid going from text to text when having Bible studies with non-Christian South Asians. Instead, tell them a story and explain the meaning and teachings of that story; non-Christian South Asians are familiar

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with this format of learning. The life of Christ and end-time events are usually appealing, and the stories of Ruth and the book of John are also good places to start when having a Bible study. However, keep in mind that non-Christian South Asians are confused about the concept of Jesus' death. Many believe that God cannot die. Using simple language will be most helpful.

These principles are just a few places to begin in sharing with South Asians. Revelation 14:6 is a constant reminder that all peoples will hear the Three Angels' Messages, and many will accept the final call to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. We may feel ill-equipped to reach out to non-Christians—we often don't speak their language or understand their customs and worldview. But Christ's method of ministry breaks down cultural barriers. And when people know that we love and care for them, they will happily overlook cultural mistakes we may make. ED

<sup>1</sup> A. F. Tarr, "Our Message in the New India," *British Advent Messenger*, August 1947, 1–2.

<sup>2</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *What Jesus Means to Me* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing, 1959), <https://www.mkgandhi.org/ebks/whatjesusmeanstome.pdf>, accessed January 19, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Jude Basebang, "Africa Needs Gandhi," accessed December 28, 2021, [https://www.mkgandhi.org/africanneedsgandhi/gandhis\\_message\\_to\\_christians.htm](https://www.mkgandhi.org/africanneedsgandhi/gandhis_message_to_christians.htm).

<sup>5</sup> Ellen G. White, *Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1943), 143.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 321.

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## THE FIVE PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

A few years ago, after much prayer, a team of church members and I entered a South Asian community where there had been no Adventist presence. We began by providing monthly health fairs, including health lectures and blood sugar and blood pressure checks. These events were a real blessing to the community. Building on this success, we started a community center to meet the needs of the community by providing various services such as after-school tutoring, cooking classes, and family counseling. In a short time, we became known as a people who cared. A house church was established at our center that was well attended by our South Asian friends. Every Sabbath, we had special prayer for healing and protection against evil spirits. Many prayer requests were answered, which led to Bible studies and many accepting Jesus Christ as their Saviour. It was a blessing to see how God intervened in the lives of our non-Christian South Asian friends. A fellowship meal was part of the worship experience, and our friends from the community always provided the meals even if they were not able to attend. This experience is a reminder of Paul's words to us: "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph 6:12, NKJV).

Shanti began attending our Sabbath meetings at the community center. She would show up on time every Sabbath morning dressed in her traditional Indian wear. She became friends with many of the new believers who had recently become part of the family of God. After three months, I returned to visit the thriving house church at the community center. Shanti was up front as the lead singer for the worship service. After the service she came to me and said, "Pastor, I love Jesus. Every week I long to be here. Pastor, my family is against my decision to join the Adventist church. They are afraid that I will change into a different person. I am patient with them. They don't know the joy that had come into my heart in the last three months." Then she looked at me and said, "I have Jesus in my heart!" Shanti was experiencing the community we share in Christ and it was drawing her to Jesus and His truth. House churches like this provide safe places for non-Christians from South Asian background to be discipled in Christ.

After one year of service to the village, the Adventist church was no longer perceived as a threat to the way of life in this non-Christian community. Instead, we were acknowledged as a blessing. One of the influential people from the community approached me and said, "Pastor, over the last year, you and your team are no longer strangers but family. You have become a friend and someone who is respected by our community. You are always here for us." He continued, "I notice you take time to visit and pray with the elderly and those in need of help." Interestingly, this was the same person who told me, about a year earlier, that previous Christian groups had come to this village and left after three months. He expected us to do the same. Today, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is established and valued in this community. This success is a direct result of implementing the five principles as outlined in this article.

It is my prayer that God will give you strength as you seek to become like Christ to our South Asian brothers and sisters.