

Delhi International Christian Fellowship

The Expatriate Interdenominational Church - New Delhi, India

Church Description – Fall, 2017

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

The Delhi Union Church ceased to function in 1986 after the Indian Government declined to extend the visa for its pastor (the Indian government stopped giving visas to religious workers and missionaries in 1984). Delhi International Christian Fellowship was started in 1992 as a home-church by a businessman, David Hudson. It met for 17 years with no formal pastoral leadership. For those years, guest preachers were invited to lead on Sundays. In 2002, the small congregation of about 50 decided it was time to make a greater impact on the growing international community. The church had been meeting in the Hyatt Hotel Indian Restaurant with Sunday school in the Polo Bar. (The kids loved the big soft chairs, the small tables on which to draw.)

With the decision to move forward, the church started to grow, and moved to the auditorium of the British School. Legal Indian Society status was granted in 2003 (giving an organized structure from which the Society board could request an employment (administrator/minister) visa from the Indian Government. A North American education consultant was asked to preach most Sundays. He stayed for a year. His consistent preaching quality and leadership had a profound impact on the church. At his departure, a development specialist accepted the preaching duties. A pastoral call committee was formed and Pastor Karl Smith was called as the first full-time pastor. He began his ministry on October 18, 2005.

The visa restrictions for the international church pastor

There are strong anti-proselytizing feelings and laws in India (India is a “closed” country). Pastor Smith’s visa was issued on the condition that he will work as minister and administrator of the Society and focus his ministry efforts exclusively on the international expatriate community. We have been told that his visa was the first religious employment visa issued by the Indian

government since 1984. It states, “He shall do no missionary work”. This is interpreted to mean, form no evangelistic relationships with Indian nationals, no speaking in a context where a general invitation is given to Indian nationals, and do no baptisms or discipleship with Indian nationals. Because leadership activities could be misunderstood, the restrictions include being very careful that nothing gives the appearance of “missionary” work, such as any baptisms, travel to restricted areas of India (Kashmir, the Northeast) dedications of buildings, teaching in schools, preaching outside of DICF, and relationships with people that may be considered to be “missionary” work.

As stated in the Times of India (daily newspaper), the Indian government considers Christian organizations to be dishonest. Their experience has been that organizations come to India with an alternative purpose. These organizations or people work for 1 to 3 years at their stated purpose. When they believe they are no longer under suspicion, they begin their missionary activities. There are frequent checks on the activities of our church. There are also monthly requests from Indian nationals for baptism or help with becoming a Christian. We have come to believe these are tests.

CONGREGATIONAL PROFILE AND DESCRIPTION

Monopoly: DICF, to the best of our knowledge, is the only truly international church in India with a legal foreign english-speaking pastor. (this is a result of visa restrictions). Many others have “international” connected to their name but do not draw significant numbers of expatriates or focus their ministries exclusively toward non-Indian citizens. Other single culture or language churches in New Delhi include Korean and German. Other ethnic or cultural groups find that some Indian led churches meet their worship expectations more fully.

This creates interesting opportunities and liabilities.

Monopoly opportunities: DICF is a good place to find like-minded friends, a place where one is somewhat insulated from the onslaughts of Indian culture (requests for money or jobs or help in leaving India), where one can find benevolence opportunities or volunteer situations, and a place for an alive and vibrant congregation for worship and fellowship.

It is also the place where expatriates will attend no matter what their denomination or past affiliation. This means DICF has the opportunity to take a person from a fairly distant relationship with Christ and move them closer. It

means we have a short period of time (2-3 years) to move a person to a deeper relationship with Christ or to be a more active and intentional seeker.

It also means that when a significant event happens in the international community (a death, a national tragedy, or national religious observance) DICF is called upon to help; to provide counsel and religious services. This is an immense privilege. It also means that the pastor is called upon as the chaplain of the whole international and diplomatic community.

Monopoly liabilities: If we offend or otherwise create a situation where people do not feel welcome, there is not another church down the block or across town that can provide a better fit between church and individuals. There is always the awareness that the only offence we should create, and that as gently as possible, is the cross and the true Gospel of Jesus Christ.

As the only expatriate worship opportunity, we are consistently aware that our congregation does not choose our church from among a range of churches that would fit their style or theological preferences. This means we will have distant seekers who come for the international community, seekers who are turning to Christ, nominal believers, and committed long term faithful Christians (a number of Catholics attend each Sunday). Preaching to this broad spectrum mix of traditions, beliefs, commitments, convictions, and theological knowledge is always a challenge.

A wide range of attenders

About 30 nationalities (this changes monthly) are represented in our congregation. There are many denominations and traditions represented, from very conservative through all the major and minor denominations and traditions of the world.

Our attenders range from economically challenged African university students who struggle to pay bus fare to attend - to ambassadors, diplomats, CEOs and business leaders ... from powerless and poor - to powerful, influential, and wealthy. (There are virtually no western university students which makes youth programming difficult.) Our Singles group has men and women from the United States, India, China, Kazakhstan, Congo, Nigeria, Spain, Egypt, Ivory Coast, Namibia...

The average educational level is higher than an undergraduate degree with many masters' and doctors' degrees. Many of our African students are in India for masters or doctors' degrees.

The working members are either at the top of their game or are on their way. India is an increasingly important world player. Diplomatic missions and international businesses send special people, which means, the average attendee is confident, independent, experienced, highly educated, self motivated, problem solving, aggressive, and accustomed to leading.

DICF is a mobile congregation. Most of our leaders travel internationally a great deal of time. In the 6 years of Pastor Smith's first ministry stay there were only two church board meeting where all of the 10 members were present. In 2010 we lost six board members who were assigned out of India. In 2018 we will lose 5 board members to out of India moves. This past year our board has again reflected our wonderful diversity with members from Canada, Germany, Great Britain, Japan, Netherlands Nigeria, South Africa, and the United States.

Specialized and focused ministry

In his first six years, Pastor Smith performed only one marriage and had only three memorial services. This is a young congregation with many families. There are few long term sick people; there are no facilities for long-term care. Most expatriates are sent to their home countries when there is a serious medical concern.

With the moving of many business from Delhi to Gurgaon (the nearby city and commercial center) and the decline in diplomatic families being assigned to New Delhi, the pool of expatriates from which we have traditionally drawn our congregation has gotten smaller. Presently we are in the 150 range of attenders. But with much international travel and much India travel we look to a congregation of at least 200 plus.

Although we would be termed conservative (theologically), a much larger group of people claim the international church as "their church" than is often the case with conservative churches in North America, Great Britain, or Australia.

We have virtually no infrastructure - no office (except in the pastor's residential flat) and no church building. We meet in the Carmel Convent School Auditorium. Events and community groups meet in hotels, restaurants, and homes. We consider this "lack of stuff and place" to be a privilege. With the

difficulty and stress of living and working in India, we are freed to focus on and celebrate the Body of Christ.

OUR PURPOSE AND FOCUS

Our church believes that the international business, development, and diplomatic community is a hidden people group. Unless they are seen as a focus of a ministry, effective penetration into their lives is almost impossible. Ministry that is exclusively tailored to their needs, worship styles, length of service, and language will have a significant impact. No one else targets them or ministers to them as a group in their expatriate living context.

We also believe that it is easier and more effective to touch a person and family while they are out of their comfort zone (out of their home context). When life becomes difficult or frustrating without the usual support props, the spiritual side of personalities tend to come closer to one's consciousness. It is in these times when the international church can make a significant impact.

A priority is creating community

We serve coffee and pastries or cookies each Sunday. People come early to meet and stay late after the service to talk (often people are still talking 30 to 45 minutes after the service has ended).

We work at being a freeing community. We do not pressure people to become involved. Life in New Delhi is hard enough without the added pressure of church. We do not insist on people coming into our services on time. In the coffee and networking time before our services, friendships are made and fostered, tears are shared, relational healing takes place, fun conversations and networking happens. For many, it is the only time they can interact with international people in their mother tongue.

We have many small national and ethnic communities in our congregation. They tend to gather before and after our services. Many languages are spoken.

We work at creating a quiet, peaceful, and worshipful morning service experience

Our people live in the crowded chaos and discomfort of India all week. Our church works hard at providing a safe, secure, understandable and peaceful Sunday morning experience. Our projected worship (PowerPoint) is simple with

no background scenes or moving letters. This to some may seem boring, but to us here in India and to our many worshippers who have English as a second language, it becomes a calming and an easy to follow format.

The service itself follows the same pattern. The central element is our “Morning Prayers”. Prayer time begins with a singing introduction, usually an appropriate chorus or hymn verse. This is followed by silent prayer. Then the pastor gives a directed morning prayer and the time is usually ended with a calming and expressive chorus, hymn or music for meditation. This “music for meditation” is another element of calm and contemplative space. We have one of India’s finest cellist as part of our worship team. As an aside, there is no clapping after congregational singing or for special music. I am not sure why but we seem to need another calming and quieting element.

MINISTRY IN OUR NEW DELHI CONTEXT OFTEN DIFFERS FROM COMMON EXPECTATIONS

Zero based programming:

With the high turnover in our people, (We lose 40 to 50% of our people each year to out of country moves) our programs need to be flexible. Sometimes we have an abundance of teachers, leaders, and community group hosts. Sometimes we do not. When the people are available, we celebrate and provide our congregation with as many opportunities as possible. When those people leave and few new ones can resume their places we diminish the programs. This is a grieving prospect at times but necessary.

Ministry within a broad spectrum of political, national, and theological opinions:

We work hard at never making political, national, or controversial statements. What touches a nerve of a liberal German is completely different than what is on the edge of a liberal Kiwi. Our church has such a broad spectrum of conservative and liberal and seeking people that the preacher and speakers must be very careful that the only offence is the cross and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The focus of many American congregations would be offensive to our international congregation. As the only opportunity in New Delhi for the Gospel to touch the lives of the broader expatriate community, we work hard at being denominationally neutral, and accepting of diverse Christian experiences,

while being Biblically consistent. The issue for our church is Jesus Christ and His Gospel.

Ministry in this context is a privilege. Freed from the niceties and expectations of denominations and traditions, the focus of worship is on Christ, and the wonderful Biblical message of God's care, love and forgiveness.

CHURCH LEADERSHIP

The church leadership board oversees our church life. This board has a unique dual responsibility. As a legal Indian Society (Our official name is DELHI INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP SOCIETY) we must comply with very complicated Indian Law. We have a wonderful accounting firm that has helped us for the last 15 years. The board also oversees and directs the administrative and spiritual life of our "Church"

Chairman - Adebayo Olowo-Ake (Nigeria)

International Committee of the Red Cross

Secretary – Kevin Horn (UK)

GKW Consulting Engineers (GKW Consult GmbH)

Treasurer – Tetsuo Yamaguchi (Japan)

Ernst and Young accounting firm

Jonathan Lohn (United States)

US Navy with the US Embassy

Christiaan Bosman (South Africa)

CEO and President of OpenHand India

Gerald Degenhardt (Canada)

Canadian High Commission (Embassy)

Peter Annoff (Netherlands)

Pastor Karl Smith (United States)

