

## **A Historic Sketch:**

### **The Free Methodist Church in India 1881-2005**

By Paula Gillespie, Editor of *World Missions People* magazine

In 1881, several years before the FM mission board was organized, Ernest and Phebe Ward went to India backed by the prayers and occasional financial support of the Illinois Conference. Ten years later, board-appointed missionary Ceila Ferries arrived. Ferries (who in 1898 married fellow missionary V.G. McMurry) was the first superintendent. It was her job to locate mission property. In 1891, Ferries was given permission to open a permanent work at Yavatmal.

The Free Methodist Church was assigned to minister in central India in the state of Maharashtra. The work was difficult and slow. During the famine years, beginning in 1899, church orphanages were built in Yavatmal district for several hundred homeless children. After a revival in 1905, many of the boys and girls became Christians and formed the nucleus of the first Christian community in the Yavatmal district.

In 1908, 18 acres of land were purchased at Umri. Midway between Yavatmal and Wun, Umri was accessible to tens of thousands of people. From Umri missionaries and Indian workers launched out to conduct village evangelism in all directions. Some of the equipment used in the early years included tents, an electric generator, bullocks and carts, a public address system, hand-wound phonographs, felt-ograms and a jeep.

At that time, Umri was a small village with a bus stop. The mission compound of 84 acres eventually included Umri Christian Hospital. Although buildings were completed in 1922, a resident doctor was not available right away. Nurses and other nonmedical personnel did all they could to help meet physical needs.

The work in India was slow. Even though evangelism was a main thrust, there were few converts. It had been proposed by some members of the missionary board to close the India work. One leader stood and said, "We have put our hands to the plow, and we shall not turn back." The evangelistic committee committed themselves to daily prayer. They prayed for a Marathi (western Indian) Saint Paul. In a few months, an Indian man came forward and seemed to be God's chosen assistant. A sweeping revival followed. Out of the revival, converts needed to be trained. In 1939 a Bible college was opened, which became Union Biblical Seminary, one of the first evangelical seminaries in Asia.

Umri Christian Hospital officially opened in 1951. While providing physical healing, a consistent effort was made to present the gospel to patients. Today, the hospital is staffed entirely by Indian personnel and has expanded its ministries to include an English school and nursing school.

In March 1956, the India Conference received full status as an annual conference – a longtime ideal had become a reality.

Evangelism and leadership training continued to be priorities. From the late 1970s, indigenous movements to Christ among the Indian tribals grew rapidly. Two of these groups, Agape Fellowship and Immanuel Fellowship, joined the Free Methodist family in 2003, adding nearly 90,000 members and 1,000 churches.

In the 1980s ministries were extended to the capital of Maharashtra, Mumbai (Bombay). This ministry in western India flourished, and by 1994 work expanded to other states in the cities of Bangalore and Mysore. Bangalore became an annual conference in 2003, and a new mission district was organized in Hyderabad.

Union Biblical Seminary moved to Pune in 1983, and on the campus an indigenous missionary training college, Yavatmal Christian Leadership Training, was launched. In that same year the government of India prohibited foreign missionaries. While ministry trips can be made to India, there are no resident missionaries at this time.

Compassion ministries are carried out today through several programs including Umri Hospital and many schools. Hundreds of children are being cared for in six Free Methodist International Child Care Ministries hostels. Many sponsored children have become pastors and church leaders. A growing literacy program works primarily with deprived women in villages. Microenterprise projects empower members to support their families.

The work in India continues to grow as the Lord directs His people.

Published works about India or by missionaries who served in India:

*Lights in the World*, Byron S. Lamson, 1951

*Venture*, Byron S. Lamson, 1960

*The Story of Fifty Years*, Carrie Turrell Burritt, 1935

*Hand Book, Free Methodist Missions*, H.F. Johnson, editor, 1941

*New Ventures*, Free Methodist Missions 1960-1979, Leona K. Fear

*Echoes from Bharatkhand*, Ernest F. Ward, 1908

*Ordered Steps* (A Biography of the Lives of Ernest Fremont Ward and Phebe Elizabeth Cox Ward), Ethel E. Ward, 1951

*Living Water, Living Letter* (Free Methodist Missions in Egypt and India), Doreen Hawley and Jessie Yardy, 1980

*Rearing a Distinctive Christian Family* (published in Calcutta, India), Jessie Yardy, 1964

*The Challenge in Central India*, Rolland N. Davis, editor, 1954

*Redeemed: Life Story of Moses David*, Rolland N. Davis, 1954

*Rozchi Bhakti*, Frank Kline

*Asia Fellowship Conference*, Free Methodist World Fellowship, Frank Kline, 1960

*Primary Health Lessons*, Persis Phelps, published in English, Marathi, Hindi and Urdu

*Patches*, Missionary Life in India, Loretta Root, 1938

*Copper Black Magic*, from Junior study book *Friends from the East*, Loretta Root, 1971 and 1980

*How the India Free Methodist Church Grew in Yavatmal District*, Elmer Root, 1962

*History of the Free Methodist Church in India (1881-1989)*, Subhash Patil