

Step of Faith Is a Big Leap for Rural Pastor Now Preaching in India

Mark Swiger left Maine for India when God told him to reach Hindus and Muslims for Christ

A rural pastor's step of faith while watching Christian television in the wee hours of the night led him to begin a ministry to Hindus and Muslims in India, where he has just finished his sixth year of outdoor meetings to crowds of 10,000-35,000.

Mark Swiger had pastored small churches for nearly 20 years when, unable to sleep one night, he switched on his television to a Reinhard Bonnke program that was featuring a mass evangelism crusade in Africa. Swiger said he then sensed the Holy Spirit saying to him to "do in India what Bonnke is doing in Africa."

For the nondenominational pastor from rural Maine, it was a tall order. Not knowing what else to do, he called the toll-free number given on the TV program. A half-hour later, at about 3 a.m., his phone rang, and a staff member from Bonnke's headquarters invited him to visit their team the next month in Hyderabad, India, where Bonnke would be doing a crusade.

Having said nothing about India during the conversation, Swiger knew God was confirming his call to the country. Though he assumed he would need about five years to prepare himself, Swiger was holding his first crusade one year later, reaching 15,000 people with the gospel.

The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks occurred just weeks before Swiger's scheduled departure from New York for this year's five-month evangelistic campaign. His first crusade in Muslim-dominated Nizamabad occurred without mishaps, although newspapers reported rioting in other Muslim cities. Crusades in subsequent cities also were peaceful.

"The mandate I have from God does not permit me to cut back," said Swiger, 46, who has conducted 38 citywide crusades in India since beginning his ministry there. "This commission is not dependent on changing political climates. The boldness that I have from God has helped bring greater liberty to the Christian community here, and they are seeing that they too can be open about their faith."

Swiger says God has healed almost every kind of disease at his meetings. He claims that approaching cyclones have been kept at bay and threats of radical extremists have been nullified.

"Miracles, signs and wonders are the secret to successful evangelism," he said. "That's the formula Jesus used. You can't beat the original, God-authorized version. The people are really receptive when they see others healed and set free because they've got millions of gods that can't heal them. So when they find the only one that really can, they're very happy."

For crusade follow-up, his team trains cell leaders from local churches for various subdivisions of a city. They invite new converts into home groups where they are shown love—an important consideration in Indian society—before they join a church.

Until now, Swiger has concentrated his crusades in cities across central India from coast to coast. He plans to take future crusades farther north—where opposition to the gospel is more hostile because of Hindu strongholds. He believes God has given him a strategy to reach 75,000 cities and villages in five years.

Swiger says God told him if he would raise up a Gideon-sized army of 300, he could conquer the nation of India for Jesus and that 300 members committed wholeheartedly to prayer, finances and service would be all he needed.

Swiger graduated in 1977 from Pinecrest Bible Training Center in Salisbury, N.Y., 80 miles west of Albany. One year ago he moved his U.S. headquarters to the school.

Maureen Garrett