

Mercy in Calcutta

Nightmares come to life on the streets of Calcutta, India, particularly in the steamy summer evenings when the city's poorest inhabitants flood the streets and alleyways, seeking what little refuge they can from the extreme heat. One mother awoke from sleep to find her little girl snatched in the middle of the night. The 18-month-old was found later—alive—in a pool of blood. Tortured and raped—yes, raped—the toddler was left for dead, and doctors at a government hospital wouldn't even touch her.

That's when mercy found her.

Calcutta Mercy Hospital, founded in 1977 by the late Mark Buntain and his wife, Huldah, took in the child, saving her life.

"People don't understand that without Christ, poverty breeds deep sin," says Randy Valimont, president of Calcutta Mercy Ministries, the umbrella organization that oversees the hospital, and head pastor of First Assembly of God in Griffin, Ga. In an area rampant with crime, particularly against women, this isn't the first time a child has been tortured in the streets of Calcutta.

"It took them seven hours to sew her back together," Valimont says.

Visiting Calcutta at the time of the incident, Valimont watched as the little girl's panicked family wondered how they would pay for her care. When they were told the services were free, funded by the hospital's patrons, the entire family had the opportunity to experience the tangible love of Christ.

Today, a hospital that treats 40,000 patients annually free of charge is just one example of the eternal difference being made in India through the continuing efforts of Huldah Buntain

and her team at Calcutta Mercy Ministries.

One Year That Became 60

Born into a family of missionaries, Huldah grew up with a heart for the poor. However, she never planned on going to India. Her time spent in Tokyo, Japan, as a child was all the overseas traveling she expected or wanted for her life.

But upon her first date with Mark Buntain at a Chinese restaurant in 1943, when he presided over a series of youth services at her father's church in Vancouver, Canada, Huldah was surprised to learn he was interested in going as an evangelist to China.

"I thought, 'Hello and goodbye.' Japan was enough for me," she says.

As usual, God had other plans. The young couple married a year later, spending the next decade on the mission field in the United States.

Then, in 1954, the Assemblies of God asked the Buntains to sail to Calcutta and conduct nightly tent meetings in the city center. What started as a one-year evangelistic opportunity turned into six decades of changing lives for Christ through compassionate outreach initiatives.

"I find it absolutely amazing that two people, as young as they were, would get on a boat and spend all that time traveling, not really knowing where they were going," says their daughter, Bonnie Buntain Long, who serves as the executive coordinator of the hospital today and is married to Dr. Jim Long, the hospital's president.

Huldah often says she had no idea how they were going to be able to make a difference in a city as huge and hurting as Calcutta, but her husband's faith never wavered. Mark would tell her, "We can't—but God can."

Favor That Builds

At times, it seemed as though Mark and Huldah didn't belong in Calcutta. With every new vision came what seemed to be an even greater opposition.

For instance, in 1956, the Buntains were asked to establish a church in Calcutta. Their popular tent meetings moved to an upstairs hall above a Park Street nightclub until Mark could find land to build a church. Huldah recalls that the property where the tent services were held seemed unavailable, as a Muslim family owned it—and they weren't interested in selling because the land was adjacent to their family home and across the street from a mosque.

But as always, Mark found favor. The Muslim family sold Mark the land, and eventually—despite one setback after another—the Buntains built the first church Calcutta had seen in more than 100 years. Today more than 20,000 people worship every month at the Assembly of God Church campus during services taught in the English, Malayalam, Telugu, Hindi, Nepali, Oriya, Tamil and Bengali languages. The establishment of the church marked the beginning of a turning tide, too, as more than 900 churches have opened in 12 different Indian states since the church's dedication in 1959.

Not long after then, the Muslim owner—on his deathbed—gave Mark the option of buying the rest of his land at a reduced price, and so in 1964, Mark opened the first of more than 100 schools that serve 35,000 students each year. In January, the ministry celebrated 50 years of education in India.

In a country still often socially divided, Mark gave the gift of education to children who otherwise would have done without.

“He started the schools for everybody and anybody who needed education,” says Bonnie, who recalls waking many mornings to find strangers at her breakfast table. “He did not see the

color of skin. He did not see religion. He saw equality of man. My parents absolutely threw themselves into giving God's gift of love and grace to everybody."

Compassion That Feeds Thousands

Velters Berkeley grew up extremely poor in a city he says is about the size of the Dallas/Fort Worth airport but home to around 20 million today. As a student at one of the schools opened by the Buntains, he relied on the one hot meal he would receive every day at the school, as he and his family often ended each day without dinner.

Berkeley was one of the children supported through the ministry's sponsorship program when it operated under Mission of Mercy. (Calcutta Mercy Ministries officially formed in 2005.) He says Mark Buntain personally led him to the Lord and that both Mark and Huldah always made sure his family was taken care of.

"In Calcutta, either you're poor or you're rich—there was no middle ground," says Berkeley, who now pastors a church he planted in Sacramento, Calif., and runs a travel company that offers church tours to Israel.

Rooted in Hinduism and perpetuated by the British colonial rule, India's caste system still exists in some ways, Berkeley says, even though it has been officially banned. It's seen everywhere on the streets of Calcutta—the only place for the city's untouchables.

Early on, the Buntains knew they wouldn't get very far in their ministry without first meeting the nutritional needs of Calcutta. Huldah says she'll never forget when a beggar walked into one of their tent services and screamed, "Feed our bellies and then tell us there is a God in heaven who loves us."

The Buntains were never the same, and they were led to launch

a food program. Around that same time, Mother Teresa took them to the city dump, where children would scavenge daily for recycling and leftover food.

“We knew if we didn’t do anything about the poverty, if we didn’t do anything about the suffering, we would never win them for Christ,” Huldah says.

Today 25,000 people are fed each day through the street and school food programs started by the Buntains.

Mercy That Heals

By the 1970s, the Buntains had made tremendous progress providing education and meals to the poor, but it was necessary to start addressing the obvious medical needs of Calcutta’s men, women and children. In 1977, they opened a general hospital for the purpose of providing affordable medical care. They built the hospital on an old burial ground Mark had acquired years earlier.

Today more than 100,000 are served at the 173-bed, six-story hospital each year. The hospital provides free care to children suffering from blindness, cleft lips or palates, thalassemia, and leukemia. In addition, dozens of Mercy Clinics have been set up in rural communities in and around Calcutta, where doctors and nurses make daily visits to provide much-needed medical care for those who can’t afford to travel to Calcutta Mercy Hospital. In an effort to develop servant leaders, the hospital offers classes to employees and volunteers through its LEAD Institute, utilizing John Maxwell’s EQUIP curriculum.

In the works is a new College of Nursing facility for those who would like to receive advanced education as a next step beyond the School of Nursing the Buntains started two years after the hospital opened. Recognized by the Indian Nursing Council, the school has graduated hundreds of women as registered nurses who work either in the hospital or clinics.

“This has a huge impact on generations,” says Sanjay Prasad, the hospital’s executive director. “Young women are given a specialized education, and with that an opportunity to be employed and earn for themselves and their families.”

“I have been deeply moved by the help the ministry has given to the poor and outcasts,” says Robert Houlihan, professor of world missions and leadership at Southeastern University in Lakeland, Fla., and past president of Mission of Mercy. “At times, when I was visiting some of the patients in the hospital, I had the opportunity to pray with Hindu and Muslim parents for their sick children. The hospital gives us Christian ministers a marvelous opportunity to reach out in Christian love to people of other faiths who are desperate for the help of our heavenly Father.”

Prasad says that when India gained its independence in 1947, around 1,000 mission hospitals existed in the country. Since then, most have closed due to corruption or lack of administration. But Calcutta Mercy Hospital has thrived, touching the lives of thousands upon thousands—including the little girl who was raped and left to bleed to death on the congested streets of Calcutta.

Leadership That Endures

When Mark Buntain passed away in 1989 from a cerebral brain hemorrhage, it made national headlines. At his funeral, Huldah says 20,000 people came out to pay homage as his casket was carried up and down the city streets. Calcutta had lost one of its most beloved caregivers. Addressing the crowd, Huldah told the people, “Today is not going to be a good day for anybody, but I want to tell you one thing: I’m not leaving.”

And she kept her word. As the first female in India to be ordained, Huldah was unanimously given leadership over the mission in Calcutta. In many ways, her outreach in India has far exceeded the work of her husband. Since his death, she has

expanded the ministry's programs into states beyond West Bengal, where Calcutta is located. She's helped establish additional schools, including Bible and vocational schools, a teachers' training college, children's homes and a school for the blind. And though she has officially passed the leadership baton of the ministry to Ivan Satyavrata, who pastors the church founded by the Buntains and is chairman of the Assemblies of God mission in Calcutta, Huldah continues to raise funds and awareness for the mission.

In 2009, Calcutta Mercy Ministries established a medical clinic in the largest red-light district in Calcutta, home to more than 10,000 sex workers. In 2011, a laundry facility was created to provide an opportunity for employment for the women and children living in the area.

"I think this has been done because of the relentless pursuit of Huldah Buntain, who's been able to really walk the road ... on behalf of this mission," Prasad says. "She is absolutely burning with the desire to make a difference."

It's been 60 years since Huldah sailed to India. She is grateful the ministry has grown and has developed strong national leadership, not only in Calcutta and West Bengal, but also in the other 11 states Calcutta Mercy Ministries has reached, saying it is so rewarding to see national pastors, teachers, nurses and doctors being trained and taking leadership of the organization and its various efforts.

Even so, while she travels extensively on behalf of the ministry, Huldah is still seen as the face of Calcutta Mercy Ministries—something she never intended.

"We worked hard and tried our best to listen to the voice of God," she says. "We were just His instruments. This was God's plan. He's the one who sent us. He's the one who performed miracles. He's the one who sustained us. And because of that, I can thank God for the past, rejoice in the present and

look forward to greater ministries in the future.”

Sarah Breed *is a freelance journalist from Lakeland, Fla.*

Watch several videos sharing the multidimensional ministry
Huldah Buntain began with her husband in Calcutta at