

# Commentary: Help us cease from striving

July 19, 2008

If you're burned out on televangelist appeals for money, megachurch ministry-bloat and evangelical politics, it might be refreshing to take a look at an organization that's trying to give a life-long, no-strings-attached hug to a few million of the poorest, dirtiest, most despised people on earth.

I dropped in on [Gospel for Asia's](#) annual conference at the Hilton Anatole Hotel in Dallas. Their main topic was how to accommodate more poor people in their churches.

It seems that back in 2001 about a gigagillion Dalits— India's lowest-caste "untouchables" — got together and announced that Hinduism just wasn't doing it for 'em any more. The thrill was gone. So they offered the Christians, the Muslims, the Buddhists and any other religion an opportunity to pitch their version of spiritual reality to them.

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The result is that GFA is scrambling to establish thousands of schools and churches around India to accommodate an increasing influx into their ranks of people who literally define the word "outcast." The word Dalit actually means "broken people."

Dalits can't be squeezed for big tithes and offerings. They don't bring anything to the table. In fact, they always show up with deep and often tragic needs. One Dalit who spoke at the meeting recalled how his parents somehow managed to claw their way out of grinding poverty to get him into a school, but he was only allowed to sit in one little spot in the corner on the floor away from the others. He wasn't allowed to drink from —or even

get near- the water faucet. "I experienced poverty, starvation and untouchability," he explained. "Now I am touched by the gospel of Jesus."

When I traveled to India a couple of years ago with GFA, I saw hundreds of these poorest of the poor along the roads everywhere doing the dirty work, squatting over little cooking fires, begging, defecating at the side of the road, scrounging for scraps of plastic or bits of cloth. These probably aren't the outsourced customer service guys from India you talk to when your computer goes on the blink. They're what St. Paul called the "offscouring of the earth."

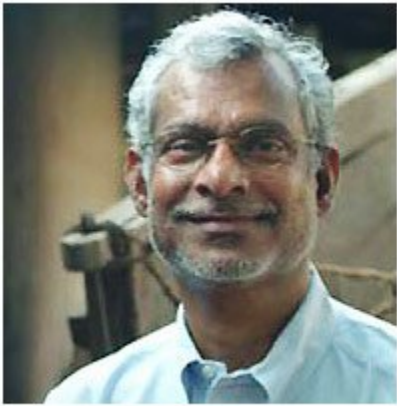
The apostle understood, like GFA does, that these are the very people Christ died for. And He can only touch them through us.

But then, this Dalit's prayer caught me off guard: "Lord, help us cease from striving."

Huh? Isn't that what evangelism is all about- striving to get the main thing done, accomplishing the mission, working the plan, doing it right?

Maybe not. The speakers all seemed to be talking about servanthood, being bondslaves. Slaves don't have many plans, and the pay isn't very good, besides.

At one GFA session, Gayle Erwin, author and a member of the GFA board, understated the case when he observed, "nobody comes out of GFA with million-dollar homes." In other words, Sen. Grassley is not interested in this group. It has too much obvious integrity. Despite the decreasing value of the dollar, there was little agonizing over the economy at the conference. The only mention of it was a suggestion: "You better hurry up and give quick."



K. P. Yohannan

GFA President K. P. Yohannan eloquently described the plight of the Dalits, but didn't mention that he still drives his early '60s VW when he's in the States. No air-conditioning. A native of India, Yohannan started GFA back in the 1970s after studying for the ministry in Dallas. Since then he's gone from looking goofy to looking grizzled, but carries himself with an air of peace and self-detachment that puts everyone around him at ease. GFA now has more than 16,500 native missionaries serving in 11 countries in South Asia. You can support one of these native missionaries for a ridiculous total of around \$50 a month.

These Gospel for Asia people take Jesus very seriously but without our western/American overlay of overachieving busy-ness, guilt, arrogance or attachment to political causes. In the Indian state of Kerala, where GFA's largest seminary campus is located, the government is run by communists who sometimes work in cooperation with Christian groups. Yikes! Jerry Falwell's rolling over in his grave. It's a different world. Of course, GFA is as conservative as can be, except when it comes to the poor. Then they're liberal in the New Testament sort of way, with the emphasis on "liberality."

Lots of news came out of the meeting. One [native leader from Burma](#) told about delivering aid to victims of the devastating cyclone and people being saved as unburied bodies littered the fields. One of the native missionaries in Nepal who served time in jail for his faith described radical changes that

have opened up that country to religious freedom.

And the media noticed one interesting angle- while hundreds of supporters of Gospel for Asia prayed and sang, hundreds of Harry Potter fans at the opposite end of the hotel gathered-in full costume- to role-play, buy Quidditch sticks and Hoggwart's capes and hear speakers delivering scholarly papers on the book and fantasy film series. (The two groups' wary interaction [was discussed](#) by the *Dallas Morning News* Religion Blog).

For me the big news from the conference was, when faced with a world of screaming need, the only effective response is to pray like the Dalit convert did, "Lord, help us cease from striving."

*Previously posted at [www.wittenburgblog.com](http://www.wittenburgblog.com)*