



# Travels to Romania and India

## Romania

### Emanuel University, Oradea

There is no quick way to get to Oradea! The options are to fly to Bucharest and then catch a domestic flight into the local airport (a route which none of the locals chooses!), or fly into Budapest and have a driver from the school pick you up for a three hour drive. When we arrived late in the evening, the newly appointed Rector, Corneliu Simut was there waiting to welcome us.

Separate apartments had been prepared for George and me, complete with breakfast foods and the makings for coffee and tea. Sleep came surprisingly easy given the time zone change of six hours. We left Raleigh Sunday just after lunch and it was now Tuesday night...two days and three cities later (with stops in Boston, London and Budapest before reaching our destination). George and I travel well together, both of us rather laid back and find ourselves very comfortable sharing long hours without getting stressed out or tiring of each other's company. He is such a valuable asset to our ministry team at Providence, as any of the missionaries supported by us will tell you.

### Teaching and Preaching

In previous trips to Emanuel, our teaching times tended to be a little too flexible and were often cancelled at the last minute, classes overlapped or



conflicted with others on the students' schedules or sometimes were not where they were planned to be. This trip was quite different! Each of us taught at least two classes per day, two or three hours per session. My

students were in the school of theology and George's were in the school of social work.

My topics were quite diverse. I spoke to a couple of classes on missiology and the power of prayer, then to two other classes on homiletics and the preacher's responsibilities in preparing for Sundays, then one session on the devotional life of the pastor. Students were very attentive and actively engaged the material, asking good questions and participating in each class.

I also got to speak in the theology class chapel one morning and then on Wednesday at the all school chapel in the big auditorium. The student body consists of about 350 resident



students, men and women from Romania and other nearby nations like Serbia, Moldova, Hungary and Albania.

### **Lunchtime Fellowship**

Each day, a different pastor or staff member met with us over lunch. The conversations ranged from the world political scene, to recollections of the days of communist oppression. In one particularly memorable conversation, one pastor recalled being arrested by the secret police for smuggling discipleship materials into the country for Austria. Documents were filled out and imprisonment was imminent for him and two of his church members, but by sovereign design, before they were thrown into jail, the revolution succeeded in overthrowing the powerful government and they never had to spend time behind bars. Informants were on the payroll of the secret police and no one was beyond suspicion. He told me that when the records were made public, many within the church had been drafted into service of the secret police upon

threat of harm to their families. Some wives or husbands turned out to be informing on members of their own households--imagine the damage to marriages to discover that the one you loved trusted most had betrayed you!

### Evenings Speaking at Emanuel Baptist Church

On Thursday night, I got to preach at the mid-week service of Emanuel Baptist Church of Oradea. The services



during the week last two hours and Sunday morning three hours, each with time for a fifty minute sermon! The following night I spoke for Youth Night, a gathering of 150 or more ranging in age from 15-25 based on my observation.



The night before the music was much more traditional in nature with presentations by a young adult choir made up of college age and older, and then several songs by the fourth grade choir. Each week a different grade provides the music in addition to the adult choir. But on youth night, the music as provided by a small worship team of two keyboards, an acoustic guitar, and two additional female vocalists. Their song choices were more familiar to a younger culture, the last song before I

spoke being "In Christ Alone." Although we were told that the Romanian congregations tend to appear to be stoic, stone-faced listeners, we found them

to be very responsive to the messages in each setting, and extremely warm and gracious after.

### **What Next?**

Our long-term relationship with Emanuel promises to continue for many years to come. Although the school has been through some trying days with new government regulations imposing significant upheaval in the entire university community of Romania,

they appear to be responding with a plan that will enable them to move forward with stability. Dr. Paul Negrut has been a major figure in the spiritual climate of Oradea in specific and the nation in general.

His role has undergone many changes as the school has adjusted to the edicts of the state but he still has demonstrated an extraordinary ability to provide sound biblical leadership regardless of the part he is called on to play.



After our days of teaching, we were asked by both Dr. Simut and Dr. Negrut in separate meetings to consider becoming an annual part of their teaching program by offering a course on missiology each year. We would come for one week during one semester each year and teach double sessions each day for one week to satisfy the curriculum requirements. George and I would share the teaching responsibilities and develop a syllabus for the class to be approved by the leadership structure.

## **India**

Ah well, then there is India! Nothing can prepare you for India--from the late night arrivals of every flight I have ever taken to get there, to the moist heat and

distinctive smells of charcoal fires that greet you when you first step off the plane, to the constant movement of masses of people, even in the earliest hours of the new day--India is its own distinct place.



## Friends

As soon as I finished with the immigration and passport control officers, I went to pick up my luggage and saw my friend and host for the week, Murli Menon. About three years ago, the Menons made a challenging transition for their school and family to a 19-acre tract of land filled with coconut trees about forty minutes drive outside the city of Coimbatore. There they have built a new home for the training center and pastors school. The South Asian Institute for Leadership

and Cultural Studies (SAILCS) was once located at higher elevations in the tourist city Ooty and is now re-established in a larger place with beautiful new facilities including classroom blocks, a library and administrative building, a home for the Menons which also doubles as a guesthouse for folks like us and the many other teams who come here to serve in various capacities on mission trips.

## Home for Girls

The Menons also have provided a home to 22 unwanted little girls, taking them from dangerous situations and giving them a safe haven in which to grow up surrounded by the love of Christ. The tragedy of unwanted girls in India is a story of a societal tradition gone haywire. Daughters must be given a dowry when they marry in order to gain a husband. Poor families face the possibility of either shame at having an insufficient amount for their dowry, or the prospect of having unmarried daughters who place serious financial burdens on the family. Therefore, female infanticide is the unthinkable solution chosen by many. Even though it is officially a crime, according to some recent statistics,



since India gained independence in 1948, there have been approximately 50 million victims of female infanticide. Champions for life like the Menons who rescue little girls from certain death may not stem this overwhelming tide of deaths, but it does make a difference to these 22 sweet little girls. One look into their bright brown eyes and at their delightful smiles is sufficient to bring a tear to even the most hardened cynic!

As if that were not enough, the Menons have also provided a home for

another 30 children, boys and girls, rescued not from infanticide but from desperate situations that offers no hope for a normal life. They fall into four categories according to the circumstances from which they were rescued-- "rag pickers," those who scavenge in trash heaps for a pitiful living; lepers who could not care for their children; victims of extreme physical abuse; and beggars who forced their children to beg for the family. Amazing stories abound about where these kids were before and how far they now have come!

Later in the afternoon at the home of Murli and Usha, a couple of old and dear friends of theirs arrive, James and Margaret Roxborough from Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) who have come down for a visit with their daughter and to spend a couple of days with the Menons. James was the pastor of the church in Mumbai where Murli first met Christ and was his mentor in the early years of his faith.

The principal of the school is named Chocko, a version of the Hebrew name Jacob. Along with Murli, he has put together a four day conference for pastors from across India as well as for the 35 students of the school. George and I will speak at the conference for five sessions per day, Wednesday through Saturday, followed by graduation of the students on Saturday night. I have the honor of addressing the students at their graduation, then preaching the final message of the week in a special communion service on Sunday morning.

The leadership team assembled by Murli is at once highly competent and very warm and personable. To hear them pray and listen to them make mature, insightful comments on the subjects we were studying confirmed that they are seasoned servants of Christ who consider themselves honored to be useful in the work of His kingdom...Simon who oversees the audio/video equipment and works in the library, Danny who functioned as event photographer as well as worship leader, Suda who seemed to be everywhere taking care of details, Prince who takes care of the financials, Alan who serves on the faculty, and too many others to recall. When it became apparent after four or five sessions that some conferees from Karnataka were not following the English messages, one of their own, Nagaraj, stepped up and translated the rest of the way. Servant leadership and humble attitudes were pervasive in every quarter!

On Thursday evening we welcomed our lifelong friends, J. L. And Patt Williams, who had been doing some ministry in across Nepal and India and flew to Coimbatore to spend two days with us before returning to the United States. Not one to decline an opportunity to teach the Word, we imposed on J. L. to speak for the last session on Thursday night, preaching from 8:30-9:30 on Proverbs 14:4, (*"Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean..."*) on the need to address messy situations that arise in ministry. In keeping with the earthy nature of the verse, he titled his message, "Managing the Manure...What to Do When the Manger Gets Messy."

### **Travels from Afar**

Seven of the conference attendees traveled three days by train from Behar where there is a team of church planters and their families. Their train covered over 65 hours of tracks to arrive for this four day conference! Ten others traveled from Jabalpur, MP, near Delhi... Karnataka state has around 18 people

here...some came from way up in Orissa State where there has been intense persecution of Christians for years...and one young man from the far northeast corner of India, several days train trip from here! When we were here in 2001, the longest distance traveled was a 24 hour train trip from Mumbai. But I cannot imagine the kind of commitment necessary to get on board for a 65-70 hour train ride for some, a 40+ hour ride for others and significant bus rides for others!

Hunger for teaching among the Christian leaders here in India astounds me, especially when I consider how much access we have at home and how little interest is demonstrated by Christian leaders in our country, not to mention the general population of the church at large. For five to six sessions a day, these pastors and students listened intently as we taught for 45-60 minutes per session. Hungry hearts and minds put a distinctive glimmer of light in the eyes of those who "long for the pure milk of the word" as these folks do.



### Q/A at the Pastors Conference

On Friday afternoon of the pastors conference, we divided into small groups and asked each group to come up with at least three questions they either currently faced as pastors or expect to face in their churches at some point. At first they appeared to be reluctant to pose their questions, within minutes the room was buzzing with animated conversations!



When they came back together, what questions! For example, they wanted us to address advice for young pastors, the role of women in ministry in the church, great struggles we have faced and how we overcame them, qualifications for pastors and preachers,



presenting the gospel message in special circumstance, such as metropolitan areas, with young people, and several other practical questions. George and I enjoyed responding and entertaining follow-up questions and before we knew it, our two hours had flown by. Although I love the preaching and teaching opportunities on these trips, these open forums get right to the heart of what people are concerned about and gives us a picture window into the issues that matter most to them.

## **Graduation**

The culmination of the week came as the eleventh annual graduation service was held on the campus of SAILCS. Eight young men and one woman graduated on Saturday afternoon from the school. The line female student, Fiby, was selected by her peers to give the graduation speech on behalf of her fellow graduates. A commissioning service to whatever future ministry field awaits them added to the significance of their special day. What a privilege to be able to preach the graduation address with a challenge to enter their careers and callings with the understanding that whatever they may confront along the, as the Scriptures say, "the battle belongs to the Lord!" Family and friends joined together for a night of celebration and thanksgiving as a new class of servants move out to take their place in planting churches and other forms of gospel ministry.

## **Renewal of Old Acquaintances**

After the last sessions of the pastors conference ended on Saturday, we were surprised to find that Thomas and Marycutty Samuel had arrived for a visit with Usha, their daughter. Back in 1986, a small group of us came to India for the first time to minister with Thomas at a pastors conference at a camp in a game reserve called Quiet Corner near the small village of Masanagudi. The circle of connections continues. Murli Menon met us and picked us up from the airport when we arrived in Mumbai back then, an arrangement made because he was about to marry the Samuel's daughter Usha! So here we are 26 years later under the



same roof at the Menon's home in Coimbatore, reminiscing with old friends and remembering God's goodness to all of us all these years.

### **Morning Worship**

The lobby/veranda of the main building served as the meeting place on Sunday morning as about 175 people gathered for worship. Three or four rows of children filled

the front with eager faces and exuberant voices. These little ones held nothing back and belted out the songs have obviously become as well-known to them as their own names. George did a children's



Bible story and in typical George fashion had them totally immersed in both the content and the actions of the story. It was quite a comical scene but wonderfully embraced by everyone. I preached on servanthood from John 13 and then we shared the Lord's Supper as a congregation.

### **Church Planters**

Late on Sunday afternoon, about 15 church planters came to meet with George, Murli and me so they could update us on what they are experiencing in their respective places of ministry. For starters, at least four of the fifteen had been beaten for taking the gospel into places where Hindu militants resent Christianity as a threat to true Indian life and culture. For them, to be Indian is to be Hindu and anything else needs to be driven away, even by acts of physical violence if necessary from their perspective. Largely the church planters and other Christians are left unprotected by the police and local authorities whose sympathies lie with the militants. Undaunted, these guys do not run away but simply find another way to create an opening for the gospel--going into prisons, taking in the children of Hindu temple prostitutes, teaching English or training

people in a new trade--whatever will give them a platform to stay and represent Christ.

Only a few years before, in the state of Orissa, over 20,000 Christians were forced to abandon their homes and flee for their lives and subsist in the forest because of severe persecution. Recently, the most intense persecution is taking place in the state of Karnataka. Church planters from both of those states were at the conference.

One of the leaders asked me why the United States congress remained silent before such blatant human rights violations. How could I tell him that unless there is something in it for us, we tend to approach human rights issues at an arm's length? Why else do we have such an uneven record of getting involved when people are being persecuted? So "No," I had to tell him. A nation that fails to respond in Rwanda, in Sudan, that turns a blind eye to China and merely talks about Syria, it is not likely that persecuted Christians in India will capture the support of any congressional actions.

Talk about a humbling conversation! Sitting across from men who have endured physical pain and shed real blood makes all the complaining about persecution in the West seem like immature whining! These men and their families need our prayers and we cannot forget them. What a great way to finish our time here and be reminded of what is at stake!