



PAUL HARRISON AWARD 2008

The Paul Harrison Award is the accolade of the Christian Medical College, Vellore to alumni who have rendered selfless, steadfast and significant service to the neglected and the disadvantaged in the area of health care. Dr. John Cherian Oommen now joins this honoured company.

Dr. John Oommen after his graduation in 1985, spent a year at the Christian Hospital at Bissamcuttack in the Rayagada district of Orissa as part of his service obligation. With a predominantly tribal and dalit population, this district has woeful indices in health, education and infrastructure. Johny recognised the possibility of making a difference for good in this region through community health and development, with the mission hospital as a base. He, and his life partner Mercy, undertook further training in Vellore, he in Community Health and she in Nursing. Together they moved to Orissa in 1994.

At that time, Rayagada had a negative population growth rate of 10%, staggering under the scourge of malaria. He started a community health department in the hospital, named Mitra meaning friend. Its fourfold vision was of a tribal community enjoying good health, education, economic security and social empowerment. Mitra pursued a bottom up approach, enabling the community to articulate their demands (through a process which he refers to as a community dreaming exercise), to participate in the process of implementation and to evaluate the outcomes.

In a cluster of 50 villages, Mitra provides a comprehensive package of health care and education with a priority for malaria. Within a year, this people's movement against malaria, based on programmes selected, funded and implemented by the people, had achieved extra ordinary results. Other agencies and another district have adopted the Mitra model for malaria prevention. Over a decade, the population has registered a growth rate of 10% with matching improvements in health indices. Mitra has extended its empowerment model to the whole state by training panchayat leaders in collecting and analyzing accurate village based health statistics as part of a joint project with the government and UNICEF

Addressing the deficiencies in school education, 16 selected villages were enabled to start a primary school of their own, with emphasis on local language and culture. This has had a ripple effect with the villages themselves placing educated and motivated adivasi youth as village tutors to enrich the programmes in 11 government schools. Towards economic security, Mitra has initiated over 50 self-help groups, that provide micro-credit and programmes for income generation and community based health insurance.

For her part, Mercy has advanced nursing training in the hospital by establishing a diploma programme in Nursing, a rare facility in Orissa. Mostly staffed by their own trainees and

focusing on local students, the course combines training in hospital based and community health skills.

Johnny and Mercy have significantly contributed to the Christian Medical Association of India, Johnny as the editor of the Christian Medical Journal of India for two terms and Mercy as President of the Nursing League of the CMAI. They are both popular teachers and role models for young people far and wide and they are ready and willing resource persons for Christian hospitals and organisations, especially in the challenging conditions in Orissa.

Though firmly rooted in his own personal faith, Dr. Oommen engages readily with people of all persuasions. He has led a life of simplicity and frugality, identifying with the life circumstances and daunting challenges of the community he has taken to heart. We honour him as much for the kind of person he is as for his significant contributions.

Educational institutions fulfill their destiny through alumni who contribute to society with their own distinctiveness. For his outstanding contributions to tribal health and development in an extremely disadvantaged region of our country and to Christian medical service in the country at large, the Christian Medical College is honoured to present the Paul Harrison Award of 2008 to

Dr. John Cherian Oommen

Director

Principal

10.11.2008