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Discovering IREF – Part 2: Rural India

Dan Wagner (IREF's new US Director) and Chip Moore (IREF Chairman) travelled to IREF on July 30th for a week-long visit. It was Dan's first time to IREF and to India for that matter.

The trip to Repalle takes about 30 hours when flying into Hyderabad. This includes a 6 or 7 hour car drive from the airport to Repalle. Hyderabad is a modern city of 7 million people and a center for many of India's top businesses.



But, the trip from Hyderabad to Repalle, is mostly a 2-lane rural road. Under rules I am still trying to figure out, we weaved between cars, trucks, 3-wheel motor cycles, pedestrians, water buffalo and goats. The countryside was largely agrarian but we navigated through a few bustling, but small towns on the way. We finally arrived in Repalle, which is a town consisting of several busy thoroughfares lined with hundreds of small businesses, few larger than a one car garage. Off one of the main streets we walked through an area that seemed so filled with despair, I could not photograph it out of my desire not to further humiliate the people living there. My guide told me that some of the students come from places like this.

But I am not sharing this with you to provide a tourist guide. I want you all to understand what the "R" in IREF means (Rural). While Hyderabad and rural Andhra Pradesh are the same in that they both have poor people, they are worlds apart when it comes to technology and commerce. That means that the employment opportunities and exposure to technology is dramatically better in larger cities. But, it may only be years vs. decades before the gap is closed. Repalle itself is very different that it was 10 years ago. To not be forward thinking would be a regression of the excellent work we have accomplished and perhaps puts disadvantage kids, that we worked so hard to give hope, back into the same place they started.

Campus

Just off one of the main roads of Repalle is the IREF campus. The campus is cloistered, in that it is enclosed. There are gatekeepers and people that keep the campus secure. To many of the children at IREF, providing a safe and nurturing Christian environment is key to recovering from childhood trauma. Early on in my trip, I toured all levels of classrooms, with the principals of each school. I saw kids practicing Telegu script at beginner level, all the way to solving polynomials, and nursing students

preparing for practicum work. The junior college has ranked repeatedly in the top 1 percent of junior colleges in Andhra Pradesh. There is a strong record of athletics achievement as well. There are remarkable stories of alumni that have gone on to great accomplishments.



Some have returned to teach. As a side note, we are updating our web page and will be posting these stories so that you can celebrate the successes you have made possible. To make it clear, the campus is a cocoon for learning. The one thing I didn't see was mobile phones, tablets, laptops and internet. While being completely short sighted, in some ways this was refreshing. Perhaps I was reminiscing about my youth.



Sometimes God Speaks in Parables.

In between breakfast and devotions, I would venture out to explore. Your heart is warmed every morning with a smile and a "Good morning sir!" The kids are so precious. Everybody introduces themselves by name and I would try to take pictures with my phone and write names on an index card, but it is a hopeless exercise. Challenges in diction also complicate the matter. But with each group, in broken English and/or the assistance of a young translator (the kid that is excelling in English class), you get a little insight into these young souls.

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Dan Wagner (left) sharing devotions with the IREF students while Emmanuel Rebba (right) translates.



Discovering IREF – Part 2: Rural India *continued...*

One afternoon, I needed to send some files back home so I made my way over to the office with my laptop to connect to the internet. When I came out, I saw a group of young men who I befriended throughout the week, but amongst them was a new face. He was a young man, no more than 10 or 11 years old with tears in his eyes. When I asked Aaron, one of the older kids I knew, "Why is the kid was crying?", Aaron told me that he was just dropped off and that he was missing his mom and dad.

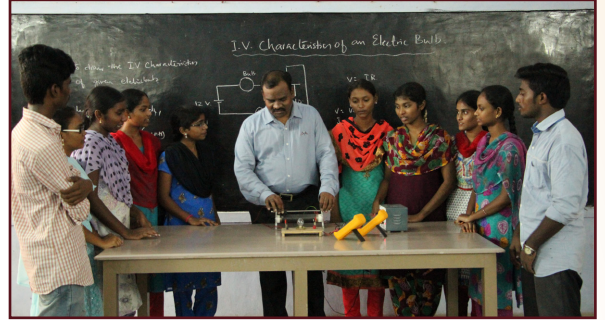


First of all, you are most proud of your kids when they do things when nobody is looking. These young men embraced a younger student and were earnestly trying to make him feel at home.

So as an American dad, I gave this kid a little rub on the shoulder and I reached for my iPhone, one of the tools in my arsenal that always seems to engage my twelve-year old daughter. I snapped his picture and showed it to him. It started to heal his pain a bit. A few minutes later, another young man from the group came over and asked me to pray for his sister. So, I entrusted this new young kid my iPhone and I gave Aaron my laptop. Stepping away, with my back to them, I went to pray for this young lady. Glancing back, other kids huddled around him and instantly the mood changed from a cloud of sadness to delight and laughter as they flipped through the pictures and God knows what else. Technology can have that effect.

But, it wasn't until I came home and went on a long walk that I realized what I wanted to share with you. As I walked, I listened to a Ted Talk podcast on Rethinking School (August 10). I recommend this podcast, not because we need to turn things upside down, but rather because it made me realize how much technology is needed to achieve excellence. From YouTube classes, downloading books, sermons, research and just e-mailing and posting ideas, technology has the ability to bring top level education to anywhere in the world. Today, a mobile

smart phone in the hands of a nurse (or nursing student) in the field can be used for recording medical diagnostics, making preliminary diagnosis and providing access to doctors. Such tools could be life-saving. According to the Ted Talk, it has raised the level of education around the world. In essence, technology is the Guttenberg's printing press of our time. In meetings with the leadership team there was an across the board appeal for technology and updated labs.



*IREF's Repalle Christian College Principal
Z. Rathna Prasad teaching students.*

Finally, I want to thank you for your good work. It is mind boggling to see how this ministry has grown and the number of people that it has touched. Somehow, God joined your hearts to the hearts of these kids. There was no headline news or great herald calling out for them. Only a simple pastor and his family. They were gathered from remote farmland villages and fishing villages that we can't pronounce. They were poor, and were destined to remain poor. They had no chance, other than they were loved by our God. Now, little kids, we couldn't possibly know, wake up with a smile and hope. They hear the Good News and know that Jesus loves them. They have hope.

As the Lord provides and leads you, consider taking this additional step in helping the teachers, students and leadership team with this much-needed technology and lab equipment.

Blessings and warm regards,

Dan

P.S. The day after the story above, Aaron and a few of the other boys from the group were baptized in the Krishna river. I was overwhelmed with tears of joy.

Prayer Requests and Praise

- Please pray for IREF teachers and staff as they work diligently each day to make a positive impact in the lives of the children at IREF.
- Please pray for the strength and prosperity of our supporting churches, businesses and sponsors.
- Please begin praying with us pray as IREF staff and students prepare for the 2018 January Missions trip. A team from the UK and US are planning to conduct medical clinics as well as participate in the annual IREF Youth Conference.

September 2017
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Fellowship