

Encountering India

Michelle Webb

After her college graduation, LeaderworX alumna Michelle Webb ('07, '08) spent a year as a volunteer teacher at a boarding school for deaf children in northeast India. She served with the [Salesian Lay Missioners](#), which sends volunteers all around the world to join in the work of Salesian communities. The Salesian charism revolves around ministering to children, and often involves schools or orphanages. In India, children with disabilities are rarely educated, except by the Salesians and other Christian missionary groups. Michelle was kind enough to share this story and reflection with the CFJ Newsletter.

One of the greatest things I learned in India was the art of doing very little. We in this culture tend to be very hurried and busy all the time. We love multi-tasking, as if one thing at a time was not enough somehow. On the other hand, Indian culture seems to thrive on taking one's time and spending a lot more of those hours doing what we Americans might call "nothing." In fact, there were whole days at my school where the only thing on the schedule was the meals. Often this led to what I soon declared my new favorite sport: "porch sitting" – an excellent companion to my other favorite sport, "people watching."



Whenever I found myself without anything to do, I would go sit on the steps at the entrance to the school, and soon enough, I would have at least a dozen children to accompany me. When I was new and didn't know much sign language to communicate effectively with deaf people, about all we could do together was sit there, in the mutual presence of each other. Often, a

more energetic, younger child would provide some visual entertainment by tossing rocks

or digging up bugs from the garden. On one particular day, one of the older girls came and sat down with me and an assortment of children that had gathered. She had a particular story she wanted to share with me. Since I didn't know much sign language yet, she figured she could simply "talk" to me. Unfortunately, every "word" she uttered sounded exactly the same, what could be described as grunts. Since she had already launched into her story, I decided I might fake my comprehension simply by mirroring her facial expressions, which I apparently managed to do successfully, undetected for the next 20 minutes. Finally, she stood up, gave me a huge grin, and went back to her day. As for me, I continued sitting on the porch, marveling at how happy I could make someone by doing something as un-inspirational as looking like a beginning actress practicing my different emotional expressions in sequence.

I believe deeply in a great message about the Kingdom of God demonstrated through this encounter. Before being sent overseas, my colleagues and I underwent "mission training," in which various people would come and give us advice on all sorts of different things we were likely to experience. A religious sister during one of our sessions told us that one of the greatest things we could do during our stay was to listen to the stories of people. Most

of us were not going to do awesome and necessary things like create a better acceptance of people with disabilities in the Indian culture, or start a sign language class for the local villagers. What we would do was wake up everyday in the presence of people who knew that we had chosen to be there



with them and kept choosing to be there. Being a part of someone's life, listening to a story that you cannot understand and cannot change and can hardly even imagine, these are the

ways that we can continue the work of God in our world. The Gospels are full of stories of Jesus' preaching, but I am confident that part of the reason Jesus came to dwell with us was to listen to our stories and be in our midst, even when He didn't have to. Something as small as our mere loving presence can change lives – in the case of our Savior, and this particular young woman, and you.

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