

# Two Faith Roads Cross in India

A conversation edited by Beth Foreman,  
Features Editor

*Let us walk  
in the light  
of the LORD  
(Isaiah 2:5).*

Flash back to the mid-1960s in the United States. A first-class stamp was five cents, and people actually walked to their mailboxes eager to get the mail. Everybody was talking about the British band with long hair and the first African American Supreme Court Justice, Thurgood Marshall. And women were sporting culottes, pill-box hats, hip-hugger skirts, and go-go boots.

It was the mid-1960s, and two young American women — Arlene in the heartland of the country, Oklahoma, and Marie on the East Coast, New York — shared a missionary heart for a faraway people, a missionary heart for those who did not know about Christ the Savior.

Arlene and Marie. Two young women who longed to share Jesus with the people of India, more than 8,000 miles away. They didn't know each other then, back in the 1960s. Their lives were separate, but their passion was one: to walk and to talk among the people of India.

*“How shall they hear,” who have not heard  
News of a Lord who loved and came;  
Nor known His reconciling word,  
Nor learned to trust a Savior’s name?”*

## Marie’s Road

Marie’s heart for missions began as she stood on a New York City harbor pier and watched a freighter begin its slow and steady journey through the waters across the ocean to India. Marie would often join her mother and other women from the LWML Atlantic District Hospice Committee to meet mis-



*Arlene Riemer and Marie Meyer at Concordia Seminary, India*

sionaries who were scheduled to travel overseas. When the missionaries and their families arrived in New York, usually by train, the LWML women would help them settle into a hotel until it was time to board ship. Since the missionaries often traveled with young children, Marie’s mother drafted her as a babysitter. “I’d keep an eye on the children while the parents were doing their errands or going through customs,” she said. “I loved it!” Sometimes Marie’s mother would take the teenaged children to Radio City Music Hall to catch a movie and see the Rockettes perform while their parents were busy preparing for their overseas trip.

On the day of departure, the LWML women would assist the missionary family to the pier before they boarded a freighter or a refurbished WW II troop ship, give five dollars to the missionary, and pin a corsage on his wife.

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Marie remembers one special day because she was waving farewell to her cousin, Henry Otten, one of the first LCMS missionaries to Muslims in India, and his wife, Mary Esther. Thinking about the mission journey they were beginning, Marie thought she might like to be a nurse and join them in India one day, a land quite different from her home.

It was a land of monsoons, mangroves, elephants, and Bengal tigers. It was a foreign land inhabited with people who did not know Christ, and she longed to tell them.

Her life slipped back into an American teenager's routine, but throughout her high school years, she would read letters from Henry and Mary, over and over, imagining she might join their missionary efforts in India some day.

*"To all the world" to every place,  
Neighbors and friends and far off lands,  
Preach the good news of saving grace;  
Go while the great commission stands.*

Marie went on to study at Concordia in the pre-nursing program, met the young man who would become her husband, and then moved on to Valparaiso University where she studied to become a parish deaconess. When her husband was called to the parish ministry, Marie served the Lord joyfully as a pastor's wife and a mother of four children. She continued to walk and talk her faith and to pray for those in faraway lands.

Indeed, Marie's dream to travel to India and share the Gospel never disappeared, and forty years later, she finally had the opportunity. When she learned that the India Evangelical Lutheran Church (a partner church of the LCMS) no longer prepared women to serve as parish deaconesses, her desire to go to India resurfaced. So it came as no surprise to Marie's husband, Bill, when she suggested they prayerfully consider a short-term mission trip.

Packing her suitcase for her long flight to India — New York City to Dubai to Trivandrum — Marie was eager to begin a faith walk where she would meet with India Evangelical Lutheran Church parish deaconesses. Like her cousin Henry so many years ago, Marie looked forward to seeing this faraway land and meeting the people whom she had grown to love.

## Arlene's Road

Arlene's faith walk started when she was the young daughter of a Lutheran pastor in Oklahoma who



always had a keen interest in reaching Muslims with the Gospel. So in 1967, when Arlene's fiancée, Carlton Riemer, graduated from Concordia Seminary and received a call to serve as a missionary among Muslims in South India, her faith walk became a life change, and she was prepared to serve. Arlene's husband, Pastor Riemer, was called to join Hank Otten — Marie's cousin! — Roland Miller, Ernie Hahn, and Luther Engelbrecht, all pioneer missionaries among Indian Muslims.

After two years of training to work with Muslims, the Riemers were ready to leave for India. Arlene packed for their long voyage to India, the land of the monsoons, mangroves, elephants, Bengal tigers, and thousands of people without Christ.

The Riemers imagined serving long-term in India; however, they were only granted a one-year visa with a non-renewable restriction because the Indian government had just changed its policy of granting missionaries visas for an extended stay in the country. Without hesitation they accepted the restriction hoping it would be lifted once they had lived in India.

But the government held firm, and Arlene and Carlton had to walk away from India, a land and a people they had grown to love. Committed to working among Muslims, they moved to the Philippines where they served for several years until Carlton accepted a call to Oklahoma. Both Arlene and Carlton never lost a heart-felt yearning to return to India, to walk among the people again.

Years later, when Carlton retired from parish ministry, he and Arlene began to look for ways again to serve in India. Working through the LCMS Board for Missions, they learned they could return to

*Deaconess Meyer leads prayer at one of the many unfinished IELC churches.*



Cornerstone laying of Messiah Lutheran Church: Pastor Riemer, Pastor Meyer, congregation president, Marie Meyer, and Arlene Riemer

India as volunteers on a tourist visa. Excitedly they made plans for the four months they would again be among the people they loved in the country they once served as missionaries.

*“Whom shall I send? Who hears the call,  
Constant in prayer, through toil and pain,  
Telling of One who died for all,  
To bring a lost world home again?”*

## Arlene and Marie

Arlene and Marie. Two women who heard the call and returned to a faraway land. Two different lives and two different walks, but recently their paths crossed — not here in the States, but faraway, in the land filled with monsoons, mangroves, elephants, Bengal tigers, and thousands of people who were walking without Christ.

*I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people (Leviticus 26:12).*

## A Faraway Faith Walk

Travel to the southern part of India, to Nagercoil, which literally means “Snake Temple.” Although its history is heavily Hindu, Nagercoil has become a vibrant hub of Christianity, and this is home to the Concordia Seminary and the offices of the India Evangelical Lutheran Church.

India was a land that Marie only knew through letters, pictures, and imagination. It turned out to be much more than a land of monsoons and tigers. She learned that it is a land of extreme poverty, pollution, noise, and the smell of burning garbage.

And although it is a land filled with people, most

of these people do not walk with Christ. Marie was struck by the pervading influence of Hinduism, a complex faith system where they worship some 300,000 gods and goddesses. Before leaving for India, Marie was told, “India will scramble your brain.” And after spending five weeks there, Marie agrees that it is a culture unlike any she had previously experienced. The diversity and richness takes time to absorb.

Arlene and Marie finally met in Nagercoil at the woman’s hostel located on the seminary campus. They spent one afternoon reflecting on how their time in India impacted their faith walk — a faith walk together that brought them closer to each other, to Indian sisters in Christ, and to the Lord.

## Imagine the faraway setting. Imagine Marie and Arlene walking along a dirt road and talking about their experiences and their faith ...

Marie: I appreciate sharing my thoughts with someone whose experience is both like and unlike mine. After five weeks, I’m still overwhelmed by the cacophony of sounds, sights, and smells of India. As much as we prepared for being here, I was both excited and apprehensive when our plane landed in Trivandrum. Seeing the smiling face of Seminary Principal Bernard and his “Welcome Meyers” sign put me at ease.

Arlene: I know the feeling. When we arrived, we were also warmly welcomed. As we rode to Nagercoil from Trivandrum, we smelled familiar smells and heard familiar sounds, but many things had changed as we expected they would.

Marie: It didn’t take long for Bill and me to realize that the gracious reception we encountered everywhere was not about us. It was all about missionaries like you and Carlton who had brought the Gospel to the people of southern India. In welcoming us, they were expressing gratitude to God for having brought them to saving faith in Jesus. We also realized that without you and your husband, Carlton, to walk with us, Bill and I could not have understood the life and work of our IELC brothers and sisters in Christ.

## Looking back, what about your life here forty years ago prepared you for the India of today?

Arlene: I was prepared for the poverty, the caste-related issues, the labor-intensive modes of construction, and entire families living in a one-room house without running water or electricity. Yet, it was good to see that many more families now have running water and electricity. Seeing an occasional ox-cart brought back memories of when the roads were less

crowded and walking or riding a bike was common. We were as unprepared as you were for the traffic that is the result of numerous small cars and motorcycles. Because large trucks or “lorries” still show little concern for smaller vehicles and pedestrians, we were grateful for the services of the seminary driver! And since we had spent a year eating with our right hand and having food served on a banana leaf, we soon readapted to how meals are served and eaten.

Marie: I never did master eating with my fingers, but I liked the easy clean-up of simply tossing the banana leaf “plate.”

**You mentioned the changes you observed. What about changes in the church and in the life of women?**

Arlene: In the church we visited every Sunday, I saw more musical accompaniment than I remember. One of my favorite changes was seeing the elementary boys playing drums for the services. Another change is that many of the coconut thatch churches have been replaced with more permanent structures. Other church buildings date back to the 1930s. One church, built in 1911, showed us plans for their new building and asked for our help. They are one of many congregations who hope to replace an old building where wooden beams have been ravaged by termites and tile roofs suffer from years of disrepair.

Marie: I will never forget the first Sunday when my husband preached bare foot on a dirt floor! It was a new experience for him! Men, women, and children respectfully left their sandals at the door, entered church with Bible in hand, and sat on backless wooden benches. The custom in this congregation was that, as soon as a lesson is announced, the first person to find the text stands up and begins reading. And the singing! Even the children sang verse after verse by memory. When they invited me to sing a hymn, my memory failed after the second verse. Not too embarrassing!

Arlene: One thing that has not changed over the years is that women sit on one side and men on the other. It was, however, interesting to see that women now often lead singing and, at times, read the lessons. This may be because more Indian women today have a college education. Increased education for women has also impacted life at home. Women are able to afford things such as a washing machine. Forty years ago, it was not uncommon to see a “dobie” with his donkey carrying a load of laundry

to the nearby river to wash the clothes. Today some women still do the family laundry at the riverside and lay clothing on the nearby grass or sand to dry, but not very often.

Whether women are in church, at home, or riding a motorcycle, they still enjoy wearing bright-colored saris that are the preferred dress of married women. Today, as you may have noticed, it’s not unusual for married women to wear a “chadithar,” the tunic top worn over loose-fitting pants, maybe even over western jeans.

Marie: Not even the LWML book, *A Rainbow of Saris*, prepared me for the beauty of saris. When we first arrived in India, deaconess Charlot took



*Worshipping congregation and their soon-to-be-replaced thatched chapel*

me shopping for clothing appropriate for a married woman. She wanted me to get a sari, but I opted for the “chadithar” style. As much as I admired the saris, I never mastered how to wrap six yards of cloth around without the cloth falling off!

**But tell me more about the deaconesses. Were deaconesses being trained when you first came to India?**

Arlene: There were several deaconesses from the States back then, but there was no training program for Indian women. I think it was Missionary Luther and Mrs. Virginia Meinzen who planted the seeds of an IELC deaconess program. For several years the deaconesses attended the seminary here in Nagercoil where they took the same classes as future pastors. They were then assigned, not to one congregation,



*Lunch break at meeting with IELC deaconesses*

but to an entire circuit! In multiple congregations they were expected to gather women for Bible study, encourage women to share their experiences as Christians in a non-Christian culture, make follow-up home visits, provide Christian counseling to women, teach Sunday School and Vacation Bible School, and work with the youth. Considering all the ways deaconesses can serve, I was sad to learn that the training program was closed.

Marie: Our in-service meetings with deaconesses made me aware of how vital their ministry to women and children is for the future of the IELC. Given the cultural restrictions on a man interacting with a woman who is not his wife, IELC women are more likely to turn to a deaconess with family concerns.

The first meeting we had with IELC deaconesses was, for me, a humbling experience. The nature and extent of their varied responsibilities exceeded mine as an LCMS deaconess assigned to a single parish. Not only did I have a car, I was given a car allowance. It was troubling to hear that these women had no transportation other than crowded buses that often left them a considerable distance from the rural parishes they served. Even more disconcerting was learning that not all of the deaconesses currently serving in congregations regularly receive a salary. In spite of what seemed to me as overwhelming difficulties, the deaconesses continue to “serve the Lord with gladness.”

Arlene: I understand plans are being made to restart a deaconess training program here. Until new deaconesses are trained, I think it would be good for the previously trained women to have a deaconess sari uniform — for their self-identity and their visibility throughout the church.

Marie: Of all the memories I will take back, one that stands out is the Sunday afternoon you and I spent at the monthly circuit gathering of women. The singing was so spirited! At first I was just amused at the memory contests, but then I wondered how many women back home could memorize such lengthy Bible passages. When several teenaged girls recited an entire chapter from one of Paul’s epistles, I thought of how little memorization our children do. Only as the women prepared to leave did I realize that many had walked long distances for the gathering.

Arlene: I was most impressed with how the prayer life of women was so rich. They did not hesitate to pray, nor did their husbands. Often, when we were leaving a home, they asked us to pray for the family and other needs. That is one practice from my time in India that I want to continue for the rest of my life.

Marie: You remind me of how each time we met pastors, teachers, or visited schools, farewells were preceded by prayer. I was more than a little unnerved when I was asked to lead in prayer as we left one of the unfinished churches. Will you ever forget the prayer service seminary students prepared for us, and how they prayed for each of our children and grandchildren by name?

My husband and I were awed by how you and Carlton were remembered and welcomed by the congregations and people you served forty years ago. They greeted you as if you had left last week. It was a privilege to be at the dedication of the cornerstone where your names appear. I thank God for the opportunity to witness how the partnership of past LCMS missionaries with the India Evangelical Lutheran Church and the gifts from the LWML have been a blessing to so many people here.

Arlene: I wish other LWML women could see how they contributed to the mission and ministry of our partner church, the India Evangelical Lutheran Church. A major LWML grant resulted in the expansion of Bethesda Hospital in Ambur to a 200-bed multi-specialty facility. The highlight of the two days and nights we spent on the hospital grounds was attending morning staff devotions. It was the first time I worshipped in a three-sided chapel where the entrance was in a shape of a fish!

Marie: Being at Bethesda was also the first time we were on the receiving end of an LWML quilt. When I mentioned to one of the nurses that Bill needed a blanket, she returned with a beautiful quilt provided by Lutheran World Relief.

I could not leave India without seeing where my cousin, Henry, and Mary Esther Otten lived and where Henry is buried. It was a pilgrimage we could not have made without you and your husband. It was in many ways a bittersweet experience. To see what was once a thriving hospital complex now vacant demonstrated how difficult it is to maintain medical and educational facilities in India. As we walked around the buildings and pictured the work that once took place here, I prayed it will soon be reopened. At the same time I thank God that there is a growing elementary and high school on the hospital grounds.

Arlene: With the right direction and purpose, I pray the hospital will once again be a viable Christian witness to the Muslims who live in that remote area of the state of Kerala.

Marie: Before coming here I had no idea what it meant to be a deaconess serving multiple congregations without an adequate means of transportation. I now understand how important it is for the deaconesses to know that their LCMS sisters in Christ are praying for them and recognize some of their needs. When I return to the States, I hope to tell the story of the IELC and its mission in a country where only four percent of the population is Christian.

Above all, this trip highlighted for me how LWML women of the previous generation have impacted on



the lives of missionaries. In so doing they were role models to women of my generation.

*Lord, here am I: Your fire impart  
To this poor cold self-centered soul;  
Touch but my lips, my hands, my heart,  
And make a world for Christ my goal.*

Arlene and Marie. Two women who heard the call and — along with hundreds of other missionaries — traveled to a faraway land to walk and to talk. It's a land of poverty, pollution, and people without Christ where they shared His story.

*Spirit of love, within us move:  
Spirit of truth, in pow'r come down!  
So shall they hear and find and prove  
Christ is their life, their joy, their crown.*

“How Shall They Hear,” Who Have Not Heard (LSB 831)

*IELC deaconesses at in-service training*

Our sisters in Christ confront challenges that are difficult for us to fully comprehend. Although several Indian women have been elected to political positions, everyday life for most women is difficult. It took time for me to remember that I was not to sit next to any married man other than my husband. It is for this reason that women sit on one side of the church and men on the other:

Marie Meyer



*When Marie returned to the States, she asked people to contribute money so that the IELC deaconesses might have a sari uniform. The new uniforms shown here contribute to self-esteem and recognition within the IELC. The colors are rather distinctive and quite different from the navy blue deaconess suit in the U.S.*