## The Tablet Interview

## Hope that grows under a tamarind tree

From modest beginnings running a mobile clinic in southern India, nurse Sylvia Wright now operates a hospital, nurse-training centre and a school for deaf children. On a rare visit to her native Yorkshire, she talked to Jonathan Tulloch about her work

idway in the journey of life, when most of us are busy building on the plateau we've reached while anxiously laying in material store for looming old age, Sylvia Wright sold her house, cashed in her NHS pension, drove to the airport and, dropping her car keys in a friend's hand, gave instructions to sell it and send what it raised, along with the proceeds of the rest of her worldly goods, to Tamil Nadu in southern India.

Once in India, nurse Sylvia wasted no time. With the help of the Sisters of Grace and Compassion, she secured a van and four boxes of medical supplies, and set off round the villages where the need for health care was most acute. What started as a mobile clinic unpacked under the shade of the gracious tamarind trees of rural Tiruvannamalai, has now become a hospital with more than 200 beds and a nurse-training college.

An educator as well as a health-care worker, Sylvia, with a supporting cast of Indian professionals, the people of Tiruvannamalai and their supporters in the United Kingdom, has also founded a school for deaf children and a day centre for disabled youngsters.

I met Sylvia Wright during one of her infrequent trips back to her native Yorkshire, this one to mark 30 years since she first left for India. The spring rain was falling gently around Ripon Cathedral close to where she was staying with a friend and supporter; a great contrast to Tamil Nadu where temperatures are now soaring to 40°C.

Sylvia would be the first to admit that she doesn't enjoy interviews; her life is told more powerfully by her hands than anything that can be said, and if I could I would simply describe them at work. These are hands that have reached out to some of the most vulnerable people in the world and helped to raise them from the dust; hands that have stretched

into the darkest illnesses of the human body and brought light, dignity and healing; hands that routinely haul hope from despair.

"I suppose it was the Bible," she said when I press her on the motivation that sent her into the unknown, 30 years ago. "It tells you to sell all you have and give it to the poor, doesn't it?" Sylvia recalls that the early days under the tamarind trees were relatively snag free. The problems began when Indira Gandhi, the then Indian premier, was assassinated. Overnight India lurched into lockdown. Foreigners, especially those with religious affiliations, became targets.

"They came for me," Sylvia laughs. "The Indian equivalent of the CIA, MI6, that kind of thing. I didn't have the appropriate paperwork. I didn't have anything."

Picture the interrogation that followed: a claustrophobic room, a mistrustful presence across a table and the threat of a jail lurking with spiders, or worse. "Who are you?" they asked. A priest, a nun, a Religious, what?

"I didn't know what to say," Sylvia recalls.

"Because I had no paperwork, and well, because I'm nothing really."

"Why are you trying to convert people?" they wanted to know.

"I'm not. I treat all religions alike."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Just trying to help people."

"Do you realise I could put you on a plane right now and send you out of my hair?"

At this point in the story Sylvia smiles and the steel in her eyes glints. "This is what I said to him," Sylvia tells me. "I said if God doesn't want me to leave these people then neither you nor any plane in the world can do it."

In the face of such opposition, Sylvia was allowed to stay and received the paperwork



that at last made her "somebody", and she's still there. One incident over the years perhaps captures an echo of her monumental achievement. It's night-time in the early days of her first hospital, and Sylvia, always a handson professional, is doing her ward round when she hears a great commotion. The commotion grows: shouts, cries, wailing. A toddler is being brought in from the villages. He has fallen in a well.

"I thought he was dead," Sylvia says. "I didn't know what else to do so I just went through the normal motions, put him on a table, and pressed his chest."

At that moment the infant pukes out fluid and draws in life. Instantaneously, his cry is taken up by the family and neighbours, who had brought him. "A great 'Ahhh!! ran through the hospital," Sylvia remembers. The cry was made up of many people, but it was the sound of just one voice. The sound of hope.

Dispensing treatment hasn't always been so easy, as was shown during a particularly bad outbreak of measles. Some Hindus believe that skin rashes and related maladies fall under the exclusive patronage of the goddess Kali and so resist medical treatment for such diseases. Respecting this belief, Sylvia was unable to do her usual nursing, but made sure that people were washed correctly and had the right food. Far fewer in her village died than elsewhere.

"That helped," she smiles, knowing that sometimes half of the battle is with illness and half with the patient. "People started to trust us."

Now that she's in her seventies, Sylvia allows herself an extra half hour in bed. Instead of rising at 5.30 she gets up at 6 a.m. The rest of the day is as busy as ever. Living in her boarding school for 200 profoundly deaf children, established in 1996, she breakfasts with the staff and children before setting off for her hospital, which, completed in 2002, replaces her first one built in 1985. The new 220-bed hospital, complete with nurse-training college, keeps her busy until 6 p.m., then it's back to school to receive the teachers' daily report.

After a meal, she takes her 20 rescued dogs for a walk down to the sheds to feed the herd of dairy cows from which the school gets its milk. A farmer's daughter, Sylvia laughs as she tells me about the herd, and about the snakes who also like to eat at this time. Although her journey has taken her to the far side of the world, in all senses, maybe it's also brought her close to home. I'm not sure whether Sylvia would dismiss this as fanciful, but perhaps it's safer to say that you can see the farmer's daughter in all she does: the sheer capability, thoroughness and effective rhythm of her onslaught against suffering. At 9.30 p.m., having done her round of the dormitories, Sylvia has a golden "do not disturb" hour: a short time to recharge her batteries in a schedule that would tax the most driven of workaholics.

Treating more than 8,000 hospital patients and 80,000 outpatients, the biggest medical problems Sylvia currently encounters are TB, malaria, Aids and diabetes. Soon, one in five people in the world with diabetes will be Indian. A new dialysis unit for those who get kidney problems from diabetes is doing wonders, but often poverty prevents proper recovery. The poor cannot regulate their diet. Rich in carbohydrate, rice can sometimes exacerbate diabetes, but as Sylvia says: "If not rice, then what? Often good food is the best medicine, but where will that come from?"

ther problems out of her control are the marriage system in Tamil Nadu that often allows ties between blood relations, and is probably behind the high proportion of deaf children. She is keen to initiate sign language both at her school and further afield in India. Until now, lip-reading has been the favoured tool.

If Sylvia Wright is humble about her achievement, others realise its depth: from the English volunteers, out of whose tireless fund-raising 96p of every £1 raised goes straight to the school, centre or hospital, to the people of Tiruvannamalai, who simply call her "madam".

Sylvia would probably hate what I'm about to write. In fact I only dare to do so because I'm fairly confident that by now, back in Tamil Nadu and immersed again in her role as madam and the truly important work of healing and educating, she won't ever read these words. The other day my nephew asked if there were any living saints, or only dead ones. I told him about Sylvia Wright, and the hope she planted and grew under the tamarind trees of Tiruvannamalai.

■ Jonathan Tulloch is a freelance writer. For more information on the Sylvia Wright Trust, visit www.sylviawright.org



## Catholic Culture An Impossible Dream?

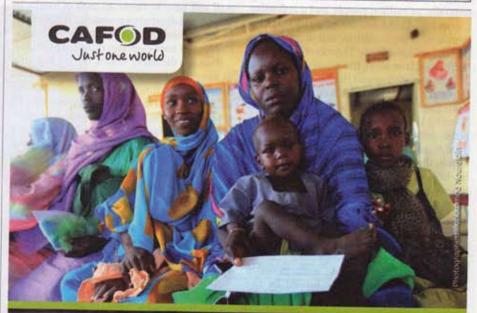
Monday 11<sup>th</sup> – Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> June 2012 Loyola Hall, Liverpool

Is there such a thing as Catholic culture and what does it look like? Is it possible, or desirable, to create a Catholic culture in schools? What would be the characteristics of a school with a Catholic culture? What forces militate against sustaining a Catholic culture in schools?

Lord David Alton Rev Professor Richard Griffiths Fr James Hanvey SJ Mr Andrew Johnson Professor Bart McGettrick Fr Adrian Porter SJ

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