

Stokebrand trip to India
by Leesa K. Bartu

The Exeter Senior Center seemed to warm up Tuesday afternoon as Carson Stokebrand, a junior at Concordia University spoke to the group about his summer mission trip to India.

Stokebrand and seven of his fellow students joined a professor and traveled from Omaha to London and finally to Bombay "The worst airport I have ever been in," according to Stokebrand.

Their purpose in visiting India was officially to teach English to Junior High and High School students. Because India is largely a Hindu country they could not state on their visa requests that they would also be there "to share the love of Christ," Stokebrand explained.

They traveled from Bombay to Chinnea, a town of 6 million, "We got a taste of what it was going to be like there ...as soon as you walk around people are crowding the sidewalks around you ...many have not seen a white person before, especially the children and they want to touch you."

Color of skin is so important in this country, the lighter your skin and the more money you have the higher you are in social standings. "They treated us as high class citizens," said Stokebrand.

The first few days as the group adjusted to the time change and the country, they visited the Lutheran Hour Ministries headquarters in India. This group has a Christian radio station and other ministries. While there, they had an opportunity to do some sightseeing and be introduced to Indian food. They visited stone temples, a crocodile zoo and many sights that were visited by Thomas the Apostle, as well as a stop at his tomb.

The food, according to Stokebrand, was surprisingly good. They had a lot of chicken and lots of fresh fruit. The variety of foods, like bananas, was wonderful, Stokebrand explained, along with the variety of up to sixteen bowls of spices and dips to individually flavor your meal.

From the Lutheran Hour Ministries, the group was assigned a guide to accompany them to their next location, a town in the southern tip of India, Kanyakumari. They rode a train for six hours through the night to reach it. On the train as in many other places they were in, there was no glass in the windows, just bars. July is the hottest month of the year in India and in most places there was no air conditioning. "The train was the worst part of the trip, it was hot and crowded," said Stokebrand.

In Kanyakumari they set up their base in a motel just one block from the ocean so they were able to enjoy the ocean breezes to cool them at night. With no running hot water in their rooms the buckets of cold water provided to help them "shower" was also refreshing. They had to be careful not to get the water on their faces much as they could get sick from the bacteria in the water and they drank bottled water, "After all of the shots, we had to have to come there, I didn't think there was anything we could catch, but we still had to be careful with the water," said Stokebrand.

After they arrived in Kanyakumari they divided into groups and rotated between three different schools teaching English to the students in a town called Nagercoil. The schools were Christian schools so Stokebrand was glad they could "openly teach Bible studies and tell about the love of Christ."

Even though the schools were Christian schools they found that not all of the students were Christians. Many parents send their children to Christian schools because the class sizes are smaller and the educational system is better. However, Stokebrand explained that some of the students have become secret Christians. They follow Hinduism at home, as they are expected, but follow Christ at school.

One difficulty they encountered was that the teachers and the students knew English words and could pronounce them but they hadn't really used them in conversation before so they did not understand what they were saying. "We would ask them something and they would always say yes until we understood that they really didn't understand. We had to help them comprehend the English words," said Stokebrand.

While the group was there they had the opportunity to visit several churches and participate in their worship services. They sang to several groups and got to hear several children's groups sing. They also visited a girls orphanage where they shared a bead craft with them, making cross necklaces. At the orphanage, which was Christian, they could openly speak of Christ, too.

They had a few more days of sightseeing where they enjoyed seeing waterfalls and elephants working in a Hindu temple. They were on the lookout for cows, which are considered sacred in India. They were warned if their car hit a cow to run in case the townspeople came to kill them. Stokebrand also talked about the monkeys who were all over in India like the squirrels are here.

What struck the group most of all was how a country could be "so beautiful in some places and then some areas so depressing. There was so much poverty, so many people living in huts. It was odd that it was so beautiful and so sad at the same time. It seemed like going back in time in some ways. They were plowing their fields with oxen but talking on cell phones at the same time," said Stokebrand.

Technology is very limited but cell phones are everywhere. Despite that Stokebrand still "would like to go back but not to move there permanently. It was definitely a great experience ...we all walked away with something great."