

EMPOWERING change

Divya* was an unlikely candidate for my sermon class at SAIACS (South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies) in Bangalore, India. Middle-aged, married to an army colonel who made all the decisions in the home, a little gauche in conversation, Divya was scared witless at the thought of preaching.

She managed to struggle through most of the required elements of the class – public reading, acting a Bible story, a sermon introduction and illustration – but on the scheduled day for the final sermonette, she was noticeably absent from class.

I wasn't sure what to do to help her, except to encourage her and praise her preparation. The next day she nervously stood at the front of the class and started to speak – then the Holy Spirit took over. She preached up a storm, and was as good as the best in the

class! We (and she) were astonished!

After Divya finished her course, she and her husband moved to an army base in northeast India. Divya discovered that, although a temple and a mosque were in use on the grounds, the Christian church had been closed. So, with permission, she rounded up the nominal Christian men, and made the arrangements to start services in the church once again. When her husband was reassigned to Rajasthan, Divya found that there were no Christian services on the cantonment. She obtained permission from

the Base Commander for the consecration of a disused building, again rounded up the lax Christians, invited speakers and started a congregation. Through mentoring and the help of the Holy Spirit, shy, tongue-tied Divya had been transformed into a leader, and had planted two churches! Amazing!

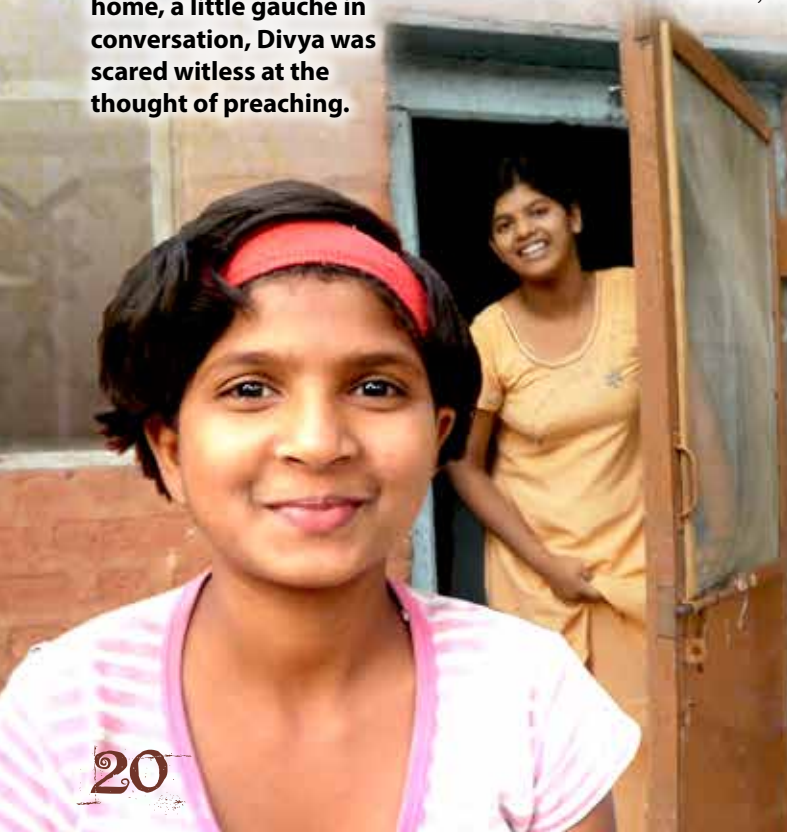
What is Mentoring?

Mentoring is most often defined as a relationship in which an experienced person (the mentor) assists another (the mentoree) in developing specific skills and knowledge that will enhance the less-experienced person's professional and personal growth.

Until I was asked to write this article, I thought the extent of my mentoring was through teaching classes, guiding people for their thesis, or through the books I wrote. I did not consider myself to be a role model, even though many Indian women had told me that I inspired them by the way I lived my life. I had dismissed them with, "It's different. I'm a Westerner. I am allowed to do things your society doesn't let women do."

However, I now realise that while I did impact people through the more hands-off methods of teaching and writing, I was also, unconsciously, mentoring through my personal relationships with them. Following are some of their stories.

One year there were two women named Jyoti in the class I held for students' wives. When I said that I would be teaching preaching, they were uneasy, and murmured, "Is that



okay? Our pastors taught us that women aren't much good in God's work. Women brought sin into the world."

Then they told me, "Our Christian mothers said, 'Don't talk. You're a girl. Don't laugh. You're a girl. And when you reach your mother-in-law's house, don't offer any opinion about anything. If you do, you will shame us.'" No wonder they thought that a woman could not open her mouth in public.

But the two Jyotis thrived in the class and experienced a surprising character change: they learned to speak up. By the time they left SAIACS, Jyoti R could stand beside her husband in his student work, and Jyoti D had become fluent in English, trained in counselling, and took a counselling lead in their mission society.

Vickie, another student, talked with me often throughout her course. After leaving SAIACS she completed the translation of the New Testament into the Garasia language of northern Gujarat, and recently organised a conference for 200 Indian missionary women, to encourage them to start using the gifts God had given them.

Three young women used to live in the hostel by my apartment: Philo, a fluent translator between English and Hindi; Konya, whose grandfather tried to persuade the family not to send her to school; and Bindu, from Odesha State where there was persecution. They listened and talked with me often while they achieved their MA in Theological



Studies, and, after completing their studies, continued to keep in touch with me. Two years ago, the three of them founded a new organisation called 'Indian Women in Ministry', with the vision statement: 'Women and men fulfilling the purpose of Christ side-by-side in active Kingdom-building'.

But it wasn't only women who were empowered to change. Mr Prabhakar took my class on family, where I spoke of the need for Christian women to take on more leadership roles. He then returned to his Indian mission society and changed their society ethos.

"I got them to include women in the committees," he said. "In our mission women now join the mission task with their

husbands. Our mission culture has changed because of what you taught us."

Tragedy to Triumph

One day nine years ago Veronica* had a word from God to visit SAIACS. She wasn't sure what she was doing there, so the registrar sent her to my office. While waiting, Veronica saw the books on my desk – books about Christian women leaders.

"What's this?" she wondered. "I thought that a woman's only role in ministry was to obey her husband."

Veronica had a Master's degree in social work and had earlier worked for innovative NGOs, but she was depressed and desperate because her husband was addicted to

alcohol and pornography, and inflicted so much emotional abuse on her that she hardly left the house.

Pastors had refused to help her so, after borrowing some of my books, Veronica often called me, sometimes after bolting herself in a room so that she would have the freedom to talk. "Does God say that I have to obey this man who is destroying me and our daughter?" she wanted to know.

In time, God did a deep healing in Veronica. She chose not to leave her husband but she

gained the courage instead to help other women. God provided funding for her to start a women's refuge and now she mentors 10 to 15 women clients at a time, training them in life skills, helping them gain an income, and protecting them from their unhappy circumstances. She also studied for her Master of Theology, and is now a brilliant networker who teaches both men and women about the extreme problems faced by some women in families and about the biblical response to such issues.

Barriers to Women Receiving Training

For many conservative Indian families, an elementary Bible School is viewed rather like a chaperone service: it takes care of their daughter until they can marry her off. They are rarely willing to invest in post-graduate training for their daughter for leadership in Christian service.

Sheela* told me, "When I was 18, I told my parents I wanted to serve God. I wanted to go to Bible College. My mother said, 'No, you don't. You want to get married.' She arranged my marriage immediately. Now, 11 years later, we have come to SAIACS so my husband can study. I just get to look after our daughters, even though I still long to train for Christian work." Thankfully, I had already

persuaded SAIACS to run the Certificate Level course for student wives who do not have the prerequisites for degrees, so Sheela was able to attend that.

Rebekah and her husband had already completed MDiv when they came to SAIACS. I got into conversation with her one afternoon while we watched a volleyball match. "I wish I could do an MTh like James," she confessed. "But there is only enough money to pay for his fees, not for mine." She came from a highly educated family, yet nobody had thought it strange that only her husband should be allowed to study, and not her also.

I encouraged her to apply, and redirected some donated money to pay for her fees. Eventually, after some hurdles, she was accepted, and in April 2013, at the SAIACS Graduation, Rebekah was awarded her MTh. She was also awarded the prize for the best thesis! Extraordinary! And she so nearly did not study at all.

In India it is decidedly hit-and-miss whether a woman will receive the mentoring she needs to inspire and encourage her to train for Christian service, or the funds needed to pay for that training. If you are interested in offering support for these women, please contact the NZ Interserve office. ☺

Beulah Wood is a NZ Partner and well-known author, with a passion for writing on family and relationships.

* Names have been changed

