

## **Bethel Missionaries Reach Out To AME India: Partnership In Love And Action**

*by Carole Copeland Thomas, MBA, CDMP*

Who would have known that a May 2014 visit to the Annual Conference of AME India would turn into a new missionary project for Bethel? That indeed is what happened to the Christiana R. Gray Women's Missionary Society (WMS) of Bethel that found an opportunity to make a difference in the second most populous country in the world. Since then in September 2014 Bethel WMS voted to support an Educational Center in Thirumani, Tamil Nadu-India as well as travel to India as an inter-church delegation.

### **From Indian Scarves and Bags to Books and School Supplies**

In September 2014 The Christiana R. Gray WMS began an ambitious campaign of selling beautiful Indian silk scarves, bags and tableware, with 100% of the proceeds going to the Educational Center in Thirumani, Tamil Nadu-India. Under the direction of Presiding Elders Abraham and Sarah Peddiny (the only Presiding Elder Couple in the connectional AME Church), there are 25 Educational Centers (EC) currently operating in India. The Christiana R. Gray WMS is the only Society in the Connectional AME Church committed and pledged to support one of the Educational Centers in India. The other ECs are supported by The Hope Center, a charitable organization based in Canada.

All activities have been sanctioned by Bethel Co-Pastors Rev. Dr. Ray Hammond and Rev. Dr. Gloria White-Hammond.

### **The History of AME India**

In 2003, while a graduate student completing a required global field study project in India, Rev. Karla Cooper built a friendship with fellow graduate student Rev. Sarah Peddiny in Chennai, India. The relationship with Rev. Cooper and Reverend Sarah and Rev. Abraham Peddiny (husband and wife) led to 20 small churches in India affiliating with the Connectional AME Church in 2008. Now there are 105 churches in one of the fastest growing regions in the world.

AME India is part of the Fourth Episcopal District of the AME Church under the direction of Bishop John and Rev. Cecilia Bryant. (Bethel is part

of the First District, and there are 20 Districts in the Connectional AME Church.) For more information visit [www.embracingindia.com](http://www.embracingindia.com)

### **Visiting India**

The highlight of the partnership was traveling to India in February 2015 and visiting the Educational Center that Bethel WMS supported. Carole Copeland Thomas led a delegation of 37 women from different churches in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island and Texas on a maiden adventure to Southern India. Of the 37 women, 14 were from Bethel, most belonging to the Christiana R. Gray WMS.

“Partnering with our sisters and brothers in India is a unique way to show God’s love in action,” stated Elaine Harris, President of the Christiana R. Gray WMS. “Visiting the country gave us a unique opportunity of meeting the people and seeing how our efforts are reaching the children who attend the Educational Center in Thirumani.”

It was a whirlwind week of cross cultural exchange, sightseeing and visiting Dalit communities in the states of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh in Southern India. (There are 28 states in India.) The Dalits, India’s untouchables or outcasts, representing the bottom of the centuries-old hierarchical social structure, make up the heart and soul of AME India. “Meeting them and embracing them with love and compassion was a joyful experience for all of us,” says Sandra Jenkins, a member of Charles Street AME Church in Boston and the 3rd Vice President of the Women’s Missionary Society of the First District.

The group also visited a Leper colony in Bharatipuram, Tamil Nadu, that is also being supported by AME India. Truly an humbling experience, each travel delegate heard the testimonies of some of the Lepers who have spent their entire lives in the colony because of the ostracization of these people from the rest of society.

The travelers also met with widows, another marginalized group in India and presented them with brand new sleeping mats to help make their lives a bit easier along the way.

Plans are underway to take a new group to India in 2016 as the relationship continues between the Christiana R. Gray WMS and AME India.

### **Continuing The Journey: India and Bethel Now Interlinked**

The excitement of this experience is that the journey has only just begun. Bethel WMS will continue to sell gift items from India so that that support of the Educational Center will move forward. The conversations and rich dialogue continue via email, SKYPE and social media. And Bethel women continue to tell the story of India in a unique new way as the cross cultural exchange of human compassion is manifested through the eyes of a loving God.

The future looks bright as God directs the intersection between the culture and ethnicity of African Americans and the people of India.

Truly mission in action has been realized at Bethel.