

## Chaplain aids poor in India

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**BY MARY KLAUS**  
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The Rev. Benjamin Chinnappan travels between his two worlds as easily as hundreds of commuters go from the West Shore to the East Shore on their way to work each day.

As chaplain of Holy Spirit Hospital, he's used to a health care facility that offers everything from a birthplace to behavior health services, from a sleep center to speech therapy. As a native of India, he's used to a country that doesn't have enough hospitals to take care of its people. He's trying to change that.

Chinnappan, who grew up in a dirt hut in a remote village in southern India, was ordained a priest in 1988.

He donated 10 acres of land and helped plan a clinic in the village of Odiathur in southern India. He also has tirelessly raised funds for the recently opened clinic, expected to serve up to 15,000 people.

"In India, health care is a luxury only the rich can afford," he said. "Southern India doesn't have many hospitals. We have no 911 system."

He said that many times, residents receive medical help from lay people.

"If you break your arm, you go to a man who has plaster and puts it on your arm to keep it still," Chinnappan said. "There are no X-rays, no setting of the bones. It's all very unsophisticated. Doctors work in towns and cities, but not villages." Hopefully, he said, that will change.

For five years, Chinnappan has been an advocate for India's 200 million Dalits, also known as "outcastes or untouchables." He and some American supporters, operating as Dalit Solidarity Inc., have raised about \$100,000 and established a children's clinic and a medical clinic near his childhood home.

The new St. Mary's Health Centre, the only health clinic in a 20-mile radius, has 10 beds, two examination rooms, consulting rooms, a lab, a pharmacy and a snack room. Chinnappan said that the clinic staff will help villagers with relatively simple problems.

"We don't have an X-ray machine," he said. "So if someone has a broken bone, all we can do is give him pain medication and send him to the hospital 20 miles away.

Chinnappan spent a month in India late last year attending the opening of the one-story clinic and the bishop's blessing of the grotto of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

He said that the completed clinic needs everything from equipment to staff members. Currently, he said, it's being run as a first aid center.

"People whose daily wage is just a dollar cannot pay more than 15 cents as consult fees," he said. "There are some people who cannot afford to pay even that 15 cents. Our policy is to treat all whether they are able to pay or not."

He said that the clinic doesn't have any source of income or any type of endowment fund to meet the operating expenses. It will take a few years to make the clinic self-supporting, he added.

"The clinic opened for patients on Dec. 8," he said. "Between then and Dec. 31, the clinic had 367 patients from 21 regions. Four nurses from Charleston, S.C., went there for a week in late January and took care of 967 patients. We have two doctors, two nurses, a lab technician, a pharmacist and an administrator."

Asked what the clinic needs, Chinnappan mentioned funds to pay the part-time physician his \$200 monthly salary, the nurses a \$75 monthly salary and non-medical staff \$30 to \$50 monthly salary. The clinic also needs a Jeep to transport critical patients to hospitals and to get medicine.

Chinnappan said that his long-term plans are for the clinic to have a maternity area, x-ray machine, ambulance and small operating room for minor surgeries.

"This clinic will not generate money," he said, "But it will unite hearts of different faiths, different castes and different languages. This hospital will serve everyone, including the very poor and the socially outcast, the same people Jesus reached out to. The clinic also will promote health education by training health workers."

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