I almost didn’t hear her. She sat just outside the door, leaning against the weathered wood on a dirt stoop. Her sari was so old it had no color anymore. No one else acknowledged her. Maybe she hadn’t said anything after all.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

I was in Madras visiting a project that is a part of World Vision’s urban advance program. This 10-year-old initiative employs community organizing as the primary tool for promoting transformational development in urban settings. Organizing people around common issues creates the community framework often so hard to find in the city.

I had come to study Christian witness in the context of our work in a country where Christian relief and development agencies are scrutinized carefully to be sure they do not stray from their limited mandate to help the poor.

The slum I visited is in a part of Madras just 20 minutes from the World Vision national office. Two hundred very poor families live here on an irregularly shaped piece of unused land onto which the water drains during the rains.

The families were rural migrants with little education and few prospects. Their homes were the standard shanty type, made of whatever discarded materials could be found. Only two families were Christian when World Vision arrived in the slum.

Four years before my visit, two World Vision community organizers began working in this struggling pocket of poverty. They patiently formed relationships, helped out in small ways, and befriended a few.

Over endless cups of tea, they talked of the possibility of forming community organizations to address the slum’s most urgent needs. There was little response.

“What can we do? No one cares about us. Besides, it takes all our time and energy just to survive. It is our karma.”

Finally a group of 10 women decided they would try.

Two of the women were from the Christian families.

The newly formed women’s organization chose to focus on trying to get the local municipality to provide a simple sewer system that had been promised for years.

The World Vision community organizers helped the women understand how a municipal political system works and what motivates local government people to act.

To everyone’s amazement, the effort succeeded. The sewers were constructed. The rain water now drained rather than standing in the middle of the slum.

Encouraged, the women continued to work for change. Electricity was brought into the community, and eventually city water pipes were run to the edges of the community.

The women organized the families living in the slum to raise the funds to extend the piping to several key locations. By the time I visited, more than $35,000 worth of services had been mobilized on behalf of the community with an investment of only $5,000 from World Vision.

Something else had happened. The Christian women on the organizing committee had been sharing their faith.

Every community organizing effort was accompanied by prayer. A pastor from a nearby church was invited to come to the community to preach and share.

By the time I arrived, eight of the ten women on the committee were Christian as were 80 of the 200 families.

I met with the women on the committee in their “office,” a one-room hut with a dirt floor and a thatched roof. I wanted to hear their story.

It came out in that wonderful, disconnected way that stories do when the storytellers are full of excitement and joy. I heard faith stories one moment, community organizing successes the next. Accounts of prayers for stubborn government officials and for sick children, of marches and petitions were mixed together.

Every Tuesday morning at 10 the women met to plan their next foray in the battle to get what the slum was due from the government or to redress grievances against local businesses or exploitative employers.

Every Friday evening at 5, they met to pray for the community, inviting anyone who needed prayer to come. Many came.

After two hours the conversation began to slow, and I began to run out of questions. I asked one more, “How has becoming a Christian changed your lives?”

That was when I thought I heard the voice of the woman just outside the door. I wanted to know what she said.

“Please, sister, what did you say?”

“Becoming a Christian means I can improve my house five bricks at a time,” she replied in a quiet voice.

“Please, tell me what that means.”

She told her story in simple words. She and her husband were among the poorest of the poor, living in a house made of cardboard that washed away during every monsoon. Bricks were too expensive for a couple with no regular work.

“When my husband did get a job as a day laborer, he drank. We lived on the little I could earn.

“But when we became Christians, my husband stopped drinking,” she reported with a bright light in her eyes. “We decided that, since we already knew how to survive on what
I earned, we would save what my husband earned until there was enough to buy five bricks.

"Then we would improve our home five bricks at a time. This is how Jesus has changed our lives."

**WHAT KIND OF GOSPEL STORY IS THIS?**

There’s a lot to ponder in this story and a lot to be thankful for.

We hardly can miss the fact that the key players in the story are women. Ten women provided the guiding energy and leadership for change in the community. Two Christian women shared the Gospel that eventually permeated the community.

Social science research shows that women often are the innovators, the ones willing to risk something new. Development often begins with women. It should not be surprising that this is true for the spread of the Gospel as well.

We also see that the line between evangelism and social action is pretty blurred. It’s hard to tell where one stops and the other starts. Prayer and political action, Christian witness, social mobilization and discipleship are all part of the story’s seamless whole. It’s the story of a group of individuals becoming a community and discovering the Gospel along the way.

Also notice that the Gospel changes things concretely. One man stops drinking, which plugs the hole through which the family’s meager money had drained away.

There’s more here, but before I point it out, let me introduce some related lessons from another part of the world.

**LESSONS FROM OTHER PLACES**

As part of her Ph.D. research, Elizabeth Brusco studied the domestic lives of evangelical converts in Colombia. She presents compelling evidence that the Gospel serves to reform gender roles in a way that enhances female status by radically transforming the culture of machismo.

As Latin males become Christian, they drink and smoke less and extra-marital activity diminishes. Brusco noticed that this reorientation means that money formerly spent on these things is available for investment in micro-enterprise, usually by the wife.

Jorge Maldonado has done research in Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela, looking at similar issues relating to the family. When people move to the city, they are uprooted culturally. The impact is very serious.

Sexual abuse, alcoholism, homelessness and low self-esteem are symptoms of the personal and familial upheaval that occurs.

Urban poverty demands extraordinary strategies for survival. Children go to work on the streets, stripped of their childhood or adolescence. Marriage relationships are shaped solely by the demands of economic survival.

Maldonado cites cases from the three countries that show the impact of the Gospel. It helps the urban poor find alternative ways of surviving in the midst of chaotic, strangled economies. The Gospel is conserving and changing the family in ways similar to those reported by Brusco.

The Gospel transforms lives, families, and communities. As it is for the woman in Madras who is improving her home five bricks at a time, the Gospel is the road to hope and change.

**THE SCOPE OF THE GOSPEL**


The Gospel transforms the family, healing the distortions that poverty and sin create. Family as partnership and mutuality emerges in the aftermath of a Gospel encounter.

The Gospel transforms culture. Money is saved for badly needed food or clothing. Money is invested to improve a home in Madras or to launch a micro-enterprise in Colombia. The destructive culture of machismo is eroded and kingdom values emerge in its place.

The Gospel even transforms the church. The whole Gospel means the church becomes a community where discipleship helps people love God and love their neighbors. It is no longer possible to worship God and ignore the plight of the people in the pew or the village.

**Sources**


"Building Fundamentalism from the Family in Latin America" by Jorge Maldonado in Fundamentalisms and Society.