

Walking the way

As I reflect on my 22 years of association with my Community Health guru, late Prof. George Joseph, many memories come alive—memories of inspiration, memories of learning in humility, by precept and example, memories of faith stimulus and personal challenge, memories of time spent together in dialogue and interactive discussions, memories of encouraging letters and notes of concern and memories of a twinkling eye, a serious frown, a benevolent smile...

I first met Professor George Joseph at the Centre for Community Medicine, All India Institute of Medical Science (AIIMS) Delhi in June 1976. "The twinkle and tear in his eye" was the recognition that I had found my guide—a guide who could deeply understand at the spirit level what this meant to me.

Within weeks, we PGs discovered that here was a man who stood head and shoulders above his peers in the department, and the increasing tribe of community medicine faculty in the country because of:

- his strong commitment to the poor, the dispossessed and keenness to reach the unreached, his intense simplicity and humility born out of his deep Christian discipleship;
- his strong conviction that community medicine was not theoretical philosophy but eminently 'do-able' community level health action; and
- his infectious enthusiasm for a subject and approach that was still by and large rejected by mainstream medicine in the country.

Learning by doing, teaching through personal example, learning by informal, non-hierarchical interactive dialogue, and converting 'disaster' to opportunity were some of the deeper lessons I carried home from the AIIMS—thanks to this Gurudiksha.

He taught us that as long as the community health approach spreads, it matters little who takes the credit for it, even if colleagues from the same or other department pinch your ideas and bask in its success. To him community medicine and community health was an attitude of mind, not just a speciality, and problems of 'turf' were never his concern. He was a facilitator, a catalyst, 'leaven' par excellence, and he taught by example that this could be a professional style, not only part of a faith dimension.

From 1984, he became a member of the three 'wise men' council for our new CHC initiative and we remember the hours spent with him exploring the dynamics of the CHC experiment. He savoured every little detail and the merry twinkle in his eye as he heard about 'ideas' moving into action was a joyous inspiration. Problems and difficulties were not obstacles—just bridges to be crossed and the work had to continue. He lived simply, travelled simply, behaved simply but thought highly and inspired highly...!

He actively supported the growth of CHC, from a study-reflection-action-experiment to a more formal registered Society for Common Health Awareness, Research and Action, becoming one of its founder-members. In spite of his poor health, he came to as many meetings as he could or sent words of advice and encouragement. His guidance was always incisive, pro-poor, action-promoting. He listened, he enjoyed, he cherished and he acknowledged.

In April 1998, CHC reached its 15th milestone and we were looking forward to his reflections in person at the review meeting. However, he was hospitalized and so he wrote his last bits of advice from the ICU hospital bed:

But the tasks/challenges ahead while it continues to play the role as a 'think-tank' laboratory of ideas, and a Resource Centre, there is an urgent need to carry out a planned epidemiological study taking into account the fast-changing health scenario, consequent to the shifting demographic pattern, and the impact of national policy and the political economy; certainly, the impact of LPG (liberalization, privatization, globalization). The study should be on behalf of the 'poor and the marginalized' taking into account their needs and 'wants' and of being twice/thrice alienated and still as recipients of the crumbs being thrown at them by the extant health system which includes the blooming private sector.

As usual supporting, encouraging, stimulating, and provoking. That was the man. That was Prof. George Joseph.

While thanking providence for the gift of such a wise counsellor, we in CHC would have paid him the greatest tribute if we can make these exhortation and dreams even more viable.

May his life continue to inspire us! ■

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