

Greetings to my sponsoring churches! It's a little late for me to say Happy Christmas, but I pray that Christmas will live in your hearts all year long. I was in Vellore for Christmas – worshiping with my English speaking Lutheran community and having dinner with fellow missionaries from the UK. This will be the sixth Christmas dinner I've had in their home. Before Christmas I went to Christmas programs and parties and celebrations of all sorts in hospital departments and schools and our Sneha Deepam hospice as well. We had secret Christmas friends at the hospice and mine was an older priest who is blind and staying in the one of the hospice guest rooms. I got him a talking clock and the hooded sweatshirt that he wanted. My Christmas friend gave me a can of Diet Pepsi, four chocolate bars and a nice picture frame.

I was the Chief Guest at the Sneha Deepam School Christmas Program and as such, was escorted to the dias by an honor guard of four young girls and the principal. The program was very nice and although the PA system was not good, the emcee had some good jokes. Here's one - why did the king plant trees at the side of the road? If he planted them down the middle of the road, it would make passage difficult! I told the story of the shoemaker who had been promised that Jesus would visit him on Christmas Day. While he was waiting for Jesus that day, three people in need came to him and he helped them. In the evening, God told him that the three people in need had been appearances of Christ. I said that the shoemaker was my Grandpa Joe which was using a little "speaker's license" - Grandpa Joe was a shoemaker and so the shoemaker could have been my grandfather. Later that day we had a gift exchange and a group blood donation to the hordes of mosquitoes! I read in the paper that on any given day, mosquitoes drain 100 liters of blood from people in Madurai alone! Madurai is another city in Tamil Nadu with a population of about one million. Because Christians make up a small portion of the population, Christmas isn't as big a deal in India as some of the Hindu or even Muslim holidays. At Christian Medical College, we certainly do celebrate Christmas! Christmas cakes are popular, the Tamil candlelight service is traditionally on the 26th of December; Santa is generally called "Father Christmas" and wears a red suit and Santa mask (making him a bit whiter in color) and gloves; Christmas parties are big in the hospital and biryani (made with mutton or chicken, rice, veggies, and spices) is king. On Christmas morning, there was a beautiful Kolam just outside my door. It must have been drawn by Rani who is a housekeeper at the Palliative Care Study Center. The Kolam is a wonderful tradition of chalk or rice powder drawings done all over India every morning, especially during holidays and special days. If you'd like to learn more about the Kolam tradition, visit <http://www.tamilnation.org/culture/kolam.htm> Just a few weeks ago I visited one of the Tsunami affected areas where the ELCA GM helped build 92 new homes for those who lost them on that fateful day. I got to participate in turning over the keys and papers.

It was nice to turn the houses over to the families. These are people who often lost everything in the Tsunami, so a clear deed and a nice little house are life-changing. I got to turn over and bless one house.

I got a notice a few days ago that I've been given the honor of being a 2010 ELNEC-International Award Winner. The best part is that they are sending me a costly book as a prize - the latest Palliative Care Nursing Textbook Recently I met a Telugu Brahmin Astrologer who told me that I would not only live to the ripe old age of 85 but that life was going to be good so it looks to be a busy and wonderful year ahead - a year in which I will need your prayers. Best wishes for a blessed New Year. Peace and Love, John