

My First Experience at the Navapur Convention

An update from the recently concluded 37th Annual Convention of the Filadelfia Churches

For the past two months, we had been told a lot about the Navapur Convention. We came to know about its beginning and how God had done great things among the people in Navapur our eagerness to attend the convention knew no bounds.

We started our journey early at 6 in the morning from Udaipur, Rajasthan in a car. It was a long journey of almost 12 hours covering a distance of about 650 kilometres. We reached Navapur by evening, the day before the convention. We could see people already arriving and camping in the village for the meeting. We were fascinated to know that the whole village of Karanji Khurd would keep their houses ready and open for anyone coming for the Navapur Convention.

The Scene

On Tuesday morning, the first day of the convention, we were excited to sit at the registration counter. Even though the meeting was to start in the evening, we could see scores of people from different states streaming to the registration counter. While some registered, others were gathering in small groups praying for God's providence at the meeting.

Stepping right in the heart of a village surrounded by mountains, one is taken aback by the vastness of the place. Lush green fields greet you from one side while a whirlwind of dust flies from the other and covers the place. The mountains stand as a guard over the campus where huge buildings of the campus surprise you as you suddenly discover that right in the midst of such a natural surrounding there is this huge urban development. The place is buzzing with people running to and fro to get those last minute things done or to welcome guests who have travelled miles to visit this place.

In the small village of Navapur which is in the district of Nandurbar in Maharashtra, the annual convention of the Filadelfia Fellowship Church of India (FFCI) takes place where around 50,000 people attend the Navapur Convention every year. A few years ago, before the campus got established, it was a vast stretch of barren land. The villagers parked their bullock carts in the place which today has changed into a plush parking area. The villagers/believers would lodge in their carts during the night. But today the same barren land boasts of a school, a Bible College, hospital, hostel and a Church. The entire campus is stretched over five acres of land then divided into two campuses. The main campus holds the hospital and quarters for main guests while the smaller campus which comprises the school has the main convention held in its ground. The desolate area now is turned into a beautiful campus adorned by gardens and beautiful trees by the missionaries living there. It's difficult to imagine the place it was and what it has become today.

Taking a walk around the campus, one can observe huge teams headed by different people working relentlessly to steer the crowd in the right direction. A long queue of people is formed right outside the registration tent where they are enrolled and handed a mattress, a bucket and a mug for their next six-day stay and are allotted classrooms to lodge for the same. Entering each room one is greeted by a group of people, proceeding in tidying and settling down in their corners of the room. While at the main convention site, musicians and worship team coordinate with the sound team for sound check. Volunteers can be seen arranging chairs and mats while the media team rush with their equipment readying themselves to capture the entire

meeting. Every person is gearing up for the next six days offering their best for the roles designated for them.

The Congregation

Right when the clock strikes 6 in the evening, people quickly start filling the pavilion. The speciality of the venue is, this place also is where the people would lodge at night as classrooms in the school fall short to accommodate the entire crowd. The opening ceremony started with the Worship team leading the people into a time of praise and worship which then was taken over by the youths of Udaipur who presented choreography on 'Creation'. Rev. Joy Punnoose, the International President of FFCI, stepped up and officially opened the Convention. The first day of Convention itself housed people in the multiples of hundreds.

A large banner on the stage called the convention-Masihi Mela. A mela or a fair in India refers to shows and exhibitions which can be theme-based, promoting particular culture, art or skill. It's a place where a large crowd gathers to stroll, to buy and sell things and generally to enjoy the different sights or the rides they offer. But this Masihi Mela is different. Here we see people coming with only one purpose which is to soak in the presence of God, to listen to God's Word and to have fellowship with other children of God. In every meeting, one can see people rushing into the pavilion to get a better spot to be able to sit and listen without getting distracted.

Nothing could stop you from becoming a part of this joyous celebration. The eagerness of the people led the speakers to take the stage without any delay. The main speakers for the Convention were V.O Varghese from Mumbai, George Monis from NY, M S Samuel, NY, Laji Paul, New Delhi and many others who ministered in various sessions. After each message, one could see people hungry for God's touch, praying with tears for Holy Spirit to touch them. Waves of anointing moving and filling people could be felt by everyone sitting in the tent, even by non-believers like the people in the sound team who rushed to see why such a huge crowd of people were breaking down and crying with joy. Everyone who came to worship Jesus felt their lives getting transformed.

Meetings would start from 8 in the morning which would go on till 10pm in the night. The main meeting would take place in the morning and in the night while daytime was dedicated to focus on different groups of people. The beautiful thing about Masihi Mela was that people came from all walks of life to worship the Creator irrespective of whatever village, city, caste, race, background or age groups they belonged to.

Ministerial Conferences

Pastors had a special meeting twice a day in the place specially kept for them. Around 500 pastors attended the convention from different parts of India. Special sessions were arranged for them encouraging to carry forward their calling for the Lord. Several people ministered from the Word strengthening each one of them. State-wise gathering of pastors' was conducted where strategies, planning for the mission were deliberated training them to attain the goals entrusted to them.

The pastors' wives too gathered in a different place where prayer and Word of God were shared to encourage them for their ministry.

Kids, Youth & Women gatherings

The kids were bundled off into the Dining Hall, where the Kid's Ministry team had spent their previous night in decorating and getting the place kids friendly. And the youths headed out for Youth Meeting where worship and powerful messages targeted them. Each meeting saw many of them repenting, being strengthened and re-dedicating their lives to live for Jesus in their schools, colleges and workplaces. Women's meeting was a time for inspiration to all those women who thought that hard labour was for men to handle. Testimonies about faith, struggle and ministering in tough places opened many hearts in responding to His call.

Medical Camp

While all this was going on, at the Grace Hospital, there was the medical camp also. A team of doctors, volunteers and the Grace Hospital staff were working to make sure all those who came in to be properly checked and treated. While it was not easy to cater to all kinds of illnesses, the team competently carried out medical, dental and other routine health check-up. Medicines were also made available to those coming to the camp. Grace Hospital is a true witness of God's hands of mercy being extended to more of his people. Over a thousand patients were treated during the course of the convention. Friends from overseas also were seen extending a helping hand to make the people more comfortable.

Thrilling Testimonials

Great testimonies were being shared during the different sessions. One of them was from this very old lady who came from Madhya Pradesh who wanted to participate in the Navapur Convention but had no means or money to travel, she kept praying about it when just two days before the Convention started her son handed her some money and she received the same from various other people. Gratefully she boarded the bus, but the bus conductor refused to take money for her ticket out of respect as she was very old. Joyfully she exclaimed God's faithfulness. Another testimony was a childless woman who had been praying for a child for a long time. The woman had a desire to testify about God. He granted her a child, then with gratitude beyond words, she declared the testimony.

Behind the Scenes

Behind these meetings, one easily forgets the efforts put by teams of people who were working day and night way before the Convention began. Several departments came together to look after the details of the meeting like the cleaning, serving, ushering and accommodating 50,000 people each day. These jobs were carried out by around 200 young Church volunteers who came from nearby villages. Another huge group of people volunteered to cook the Navapur special *dal-chawal* (rice and lentils) for thousands and thousands of people, three times a day.

There were many other facilities like canteens and food stalls, but a large number of people would use the facility available on the campus. This year a canteen was run by the Filadelfia Bible College students as an initiative to raise money for mission work. Apart from them, a team was appointed to keep the grounds, rooms, bathrooms clean. An initiative that was taken since last year to educate people about cleanliness was the introduction of garbage bags which were hung at regular places and people were encouraged to drop waste in them. A great change

has been evident since the introduction of these garbage bags as people took efforts to keep the place clean.

Then came the finance team who tirelessly and faithfully counted, recorded and collected the offering money that the people of God cheerfully gave. Apart from them a team of people to care for the pastoral team were reserved who spent time in taking care of the needs of the servants of God. The sound and the lights team could be seen on the venue analysing all the mikes and various other equipment to make sure everything was going smoothly.

Back to back meetings were taking place and each day the crowd was becoming bigger and hungrier for God's Word. People were travelling from various parts of the country and guests from abroad could also be seen taking part in these meetings.

Convocation

On Saturday, the graduation ceremony of the Filadelfia Bible College (FBC) students took place. A day of pride and honour as the batch of students not only received their certificates of degree and academic excellence but also it was the day when they were officially sealed as trained soldiers ready for the battle. With prayers, they were sent out to take their position in the warfare. Another generation of leaders arose as the junior students looked at them with respect and found inspiration to stand with them one day, shoulder to shoulder in this battle. It was a day of utmost pride, a day to behold as the mentors and guides looked at their students with an array of emotions- of nostalgia and excitement of finally getting them ready to strengthen their feet to take the gospel to the needy places.

Communion

The Convention ended the next day on Sunday with Lord's Supper. A joyous and an unbelievable occasion where one could witness the miniature of heaven on earth as people gathered to partake in the Communion with fear mingled with joy. It was a sight to behold as people with tears in their eyes confessed that Jesus Christ is the only Saviour and declaring over and over again that He alone is Holy.

The crowd didn't boast of educated, elite and privileged people of the society but simpletons from villages who were crying out in joy filled with the Holy Spirit. They shook the people around them, humbling everyone in the faith. The holy-communion was the loveliest event of the convention where joyous shouts resonated as everyone participated together like children of the same Father, hugging each other at the end of it, enjoying the fellowship and bidding goodbye to each other as curtains were closing on the Navapur Convention. A long week flew away in a jiffy as the convention for the year 2017 got wrapped up with the people starting off their journey back home fully charged to stand faithfully for Jesus.