

Dear Leprosy Mission Friend,

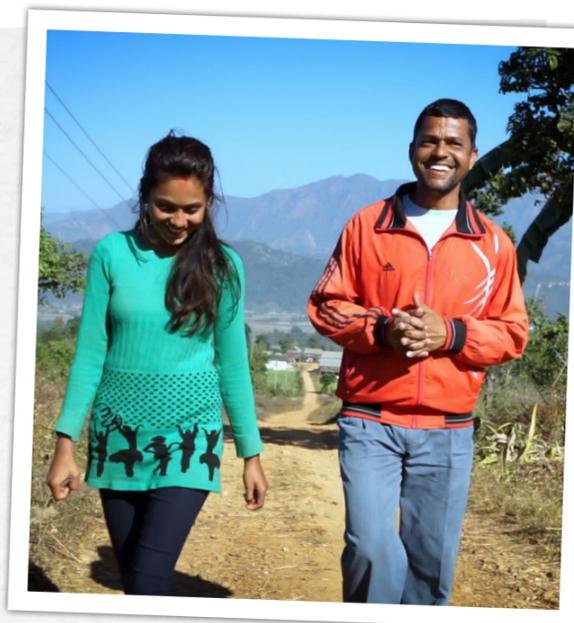
I remember when my wife first discovered patches on her skin.

She was worried what her parents would think. They were from a high caste. Her father was a priest. He told her that because she had leprosy, she was cursed.

It wasn't long after this that she hung herself.

All I had was my children. I wanted them to have a bright future.

At first, I didn't know what was happening to my daughter. Some people told us it was tuberculosis (TB). Others said it was cancer. Only when we went to the community hospital did we discover that my daughter Samana had leprosy too.



**"Your help has made me feel that God is looking after us."**

Through the help of The Leprosy Mission Australia, my daughter received the correct treatment.

Her hand used to be clawed, but since the operation she has much more movement in her fingers. Samana also received a scholarship through The Leprosy Mission's education program. Without this, I could never have afforded the good education she deserves.

**Knowing Samana's leprosy was cured lifted our spirits.**

Nobody should have to go through the stigma and discrimination my daughter and my wife suffered. Yet I have discovered there are so many people in my community hidden, not wanting anyone to know that they had leprosy.

I don't want the story of Samana's mother to be repeated.

That's why I am part of The Leprosy Mission's self-help group. We show people in the community that leprosy is curable, and not a curse. Fewer people are hiding their symptoms, and more people are being treated!

Through The Leprosy Mission Australia, I received a loan so I could breed chickens. They also gave me agriculture and business training, so I could earn income in my own village, and not have to leave my children. I have already sold some chickens, which has enabled me to provide for my family, and repay my loan.

A small amount of help from Australian donors has made a big difference for my daughter and my community.

**Thank you. Your help has made me feel that God is looking after us.**

Shivaram, from Nepal



## Keeping in Touch Issue 2, 2022

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### "If you are tired from carrying heavy burdens, come to me and I will give you rest." Matthew 11:28 (CEV)



By Sheldon Rankin  
CEO  
The Leprosy Mission Australia

If you're anything like me, these words of Jesus will have been a source of comfort when facing challenging times in life. These last two COVID years, I've leaned on this verse a lot.

It's helped me here at The Leprosy Mission as we faced extra challenges from COVID – supply line disruptions in Nigeria ... our colleagues in India losing family members to COVID ... people with leprosy pushed to the end of the line for COVID vaccinations and their ongoing treatment of leprosy.

This verse has also been a comfort in my personal life. There's a deep pain when you are separated from family and friends, as COVID caused. There was the loneliness and sadness of lockdowns. Even now there is uncertainty about what comes next.

When I think on Jesus' promise in the verse, one word stands out to me.

No, it's not 'tired' – though that I certainly am. Not 'burdens' – though there are many, and often they feel too 'heavy' to be 'carrying'. Not even Jesus' offer to 'come to me'.

The word that stands out to me is 'rest'. Rest. Rest does not mean stop. It's not job over, everything's done, time to go home.

No, we rest, so we can recover and refresh, and then start again. Go back to those burdens. Knowing they are heavy. Knowing we will likely tire again as we carry them, but also knowing we are not alone, that Jesus sees us carrying these burdens and is there to support us.

I know compassionate people like you likely receive many calls on your help, and sometimes you might wish it all would stop.

Please know, I never expect you to give ... or judge you, or make you feel guilty, when you can't ... or want you to give if it stretches you too thin.

**More importantly, your prayer is a blessing now more than ever. Your caring Christian heart is essential to God's healing ministry toward people affected by leprosy. Together, we seek to bring about transformation and 'Life in all its Fullness'.**

Thank you for joining with us to commit our work to The Lord, for seeking God's will and for being inspired by the Holy Spirit.

**God bless you!**



International Day of  
People with Disability

Left: Joel playing basketball. Right: Helen and Joel Fernandes

## International Day of People with Disabilities

Friday 3rd December marked International Day of People with Disabilities. On this day, The Leprosy Mission Australia joined with various organisations to celebrate diversity of all people and raise awareness of the continued existing inequalities that prevent people with disabilities from full inclusion in society.

In 2021, in a world recovering from COVID-19, the International Day of People with Disabilities is focused on building a #BetterWorldForAll with 'leadership and participation of persons with disabilities towards an inclusive, accessible and sustainable post-COVID-19 world'.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 has had catastrophic impacts on people with disabilities. Barriers that people have worked years to break down have once again returned and in increasing numbers across various aspects, such as employment, health and information access. As COVID-19 overwhelms our systems, the needs of people with disabilities have been overlooked. A global survey found that 1 in 3 respondents had lost access to needed disability-related supports (e.g. wheelchair replacements and repairs).

Currently, 1 billion people or 15% of the world's population experience disability. However, according to the World Health Organization, this number is predicted to rise due to an ageing population and increase in non-communicable diseases.

As the world recovers from the global pandemic, this International Day of People with Disabilities calls for all people to work towards building a more diverse disability inclusive post COVID-19 world. This includes people with leprosy, where preventable disabilities continue to develop and in many part of the world, they continue to face significant stigma and exclusion from their communities.

At the Leprosy Mission, disability inclusion and discrimination have been at the forefront of our minds in 2021, as our projects work hard to ensure that people with leprosy are supported throughout the pandemic and continue to have a voice in their communities. We have experienced both successes and setbacks.

In recognition of this International Day, we want to celebrate a few of the successes our projects have experienced in disability inclusion over the past year:

In Timor-Leste advocacy by the Rights of People with Disabilities project resulted in a new public works order that requires all public and commercial buildings to be accessible to all persons with a disability. In addition, sign language is now available during national news broadcasts.

In Nigeria, thumbprint identification is used to register to vote. This was a barrier for people with leprosy who had lost fingers.

Previously they would have been unable to register to vote. The government has now developed an accessible system for them thus allowing them to take part in the national elections.

In Nepal, 926 people were supported in 2021 to obtain disability ID cards from the government. These ID cards allow for much needed supports for people experiencing disabilities (e.g. access to free transportation).

In India, during COVID-19, the Inclusive Empowerment team successfully advocated for COVID-19 vaccines to be provided to people with disabilities within their homes.

In addition, the team successfully advocated for the inclusion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act into the police database software. This means that when people with disabilities fall victim to a crime, they can now be recognised in the system as a person with a disability. This then ensures that the laws and entitlements for people with disabilities can be implemented without fail. In the past, this was not available, meaning that many people with disabilities were unable to access appropriate entitlements and legal supports.

Furthermore, after successful petitioning, the government announced an initiative of providing free town bus rides for all persons with disabilities in Tamil Nadu.

As you can see from the above achievement, there is much to celebrate and be thankful for in the progress our project partners have achieved in building a more inclusive world.

However, progress also came with many challenges.

In India, patient visits to the hospitals have significantly dropped during the pandemic and lockdown. This means that many leprosy patients may have been unable to travel to the hospital to receive the treatment they needed.

Floods in Timor-Leste, during the country lockdown, increased difficulties for people with leprosy and disability, with damage to homes and

difficulties in income generation pushing them further into poverty.

In addition, there was a significant global drop in reported leprosy case numbers in 2020 of 129,192 cases. This was a 37.1% drop compared to 2019 and is most likely due to less detection and reporting during the pandemic. This has significant ramification for future years, as undetected cases can lead to increased risk of permanent disability and deformity.

Therefore, as we celebrate the successes in disability inclusion, we also recognise the significant hurdles in accessibility and inclusion still faced by people with leprosy and disabilities around the world. There is still much to do but The Leprosy Mission Australia along with our partners, are eager to continue advocating for increased disability inclusion, so that perhaps one day we can help achieve the goal of a more disability inclusive, better world for all.

Joel and Helen Fernandes (pictured above) who many of you know from their time on staff at the Box Hill office, know the challenges that people with disability can face. In 2006, Joel was involved in a serious road accident that left him with a spinal cord injury. Access to disability services in Timor-Leste was extremely limited but things started to change after the country's only disability support organisation gave Joel a wheelchair.

Then in 2011, Joel met Helen, an Australian occupational therapist and the couple formed a special bond that challenged all stereotypes. Read Joel and Helen's full ABC article at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-12-04/couple-say-stigma-exists-around-disability-and-relationships/100665908>

**Please pray for Joel and people around the world affected by disability. Pray that people with disabilities will be able to access healthcare, education and employment so that they can be active participants in their communities.**