



News Release

For immediate release

World Leprosy Day 2009:

Breaking Down Age-old Barriers of Stigma and Discrimination

For centuries the word “leprosy” has generated fear and horror. Far from being a disease of the past, leprosy still affects the lives of millions of men, women and children worldwide – still bringing disability, rejection and social discrimination.

On 25 January 2009, more than 100 countries will mark World Leprosy Day, calling for an end to the discrimination and stigma that blight the lives of people affected by leprosy and their families

Leprosy still affects millions of people today, typically in some of the world’s poorest communities. **Every two minutes someone in the world is told they have leprosy!** Yet most people in developed countries don’t know that leprosy still exists. World Leprosy Day, now in its 55th year, is an opportunity to raise awareness, and advocate for the rights of people affected by the disease.

In places where there is leprosy, The Leprosy Mission together with other similar organisations and ex-leprosy patient groups, use the day to petition governments for improved services, and advocate for changed community attitudes towards people who have had leprosy. Street campaigns and public promotions are held, to spread the word that leprosy is curable – that it is not a curse and it is not caught by touch.

Leprosy is much more than a physical disease; it is a human rights issue leading to terrible social exclusion and injustice.

In many places leprosy is still seen as a curse or a punishment from the gods, and so a person diagnosed with leprosy can lose their job, their place in their community, even their husband or wife and children. As a result, many people, when they discover symptoms of leprosy, hide their symptoms for as long as possible, out of shame and fear. But delaying treatment only increases the chance that they will develop permanent deformities and physical disabilities.

These just make their discrimination and isolation even worse than before.

Healing, Restoring, Empowering

But there is hope. Because better health care and education are being provided, the barriers of discrimination against individuals affected by leprosy are beginning to be broken down in their communities and family groups. Health professionals are being taught how to diagnose and treat the disease, and people with leprosy are receiving the medication they need. If leprosy is diagnosed early, the patient can be treated and completely cured with Multidrug Therapy (MDT). Those who do not receive treatment early enough, can still be cured of the disease and can learn to look after themselves to help prevent a life of disability.

The treatment is life-changing:

“Today I have a hold on my life and dignity in society”: Because Mr Subramanian’s leprosy was successfully treated at a TLM hospital in South India; he is now happily married and able to earn a decent wage as a shoemaker.

The Leprosy Mission works hand in hand with governments and with grassroots communities, with local NGOs, churches, partner and ex-patient organisations, to achieve our vision of a world without leprosy. Our expertise is in the detection, treatment, care, rehabilitation and reintegration of people and communities affected by leprosy. We share this expertise with government and health workers through projects and national training programmes.

Around the world, The Leprosy Mission produces free resources to help schools, groups and churches raise awareness around the time of World Leprosy Day. For more details, visit www.leprosymission.org

Changing Attitudes

Mr Geoff Warne, General Director for The Leprosy Mission International, says, *“Discriminating against people who are different, disabled or living with a particular disease or illness is a deeply-rooted problem in human society and relationships.*

“When I am talking to people affected by leprosy, they tell me about the barriers that society erects against them, especially if they carry the signs of leprosy on their bodies - damaged hands, feet, eyes or skin. Tackling these barriers is the constant preoccupation of many of TLM’s front-line staff.

“How do we do that? Through well-directed advocacy, encouraging communities to change attitudes and behaviour towards previously excluded people. Through physical and social rehabilitation, working with disabled people to enable them to once again make valued contributions to family and community. Through empowerment programmes, where we see the lives of people dramatically changed as they begin to work together on the issues that affect them, and to speak for themselves.

“We work with and not just for leprosy-affected people, seeking to enhance their dignity as people made in God’s image.”

About The Leprosy Mission

The Leprosy Mission is an international Christian organisation working toward the eradication of the causes and consequences of leprosy.

We are a global network of organisations active in over 50 countries, supporting programmes in around 30 countries where leprosy is still a chronic disease and a social problem. TLM has served people affected by leprosy since 1874.

About Leprosy

Almost four million people around the world live with the permanent effects of leprosy. Also called Hansen’s Disease, leprosy attacks nerves that are located near the cooler parts of the body - extremities such as the hands, feet and face are especially vulnerable. The most common symptom is discoloured patches of skin that lose their sensitivity. If left untreated, leprosy can cause the fingers and toes to claw inward and the eyes to lose their ability to blink, therefore causing blindness and recurring ulcers and infections on various parts of the body. These ulcers and infections in the hands and feet develop when cuts, bruises and burns are ignored due to a lack of sensation and secondary infections occur.

A combination of three separate medications (Dapsone, Clofazamine and Rifampicin), known as Multi-Drug Therapy, kills the bacteria that cause leprosy. On average, the cost to bring the cure and necessary after-cure treatment to a patient is

only about £165. This sum covers education, distribution of medication, surgery, rehabilitation and essential ongoing support.

Today, in Asia, Africa and Latin America, leprosy is still an active health and social problem. For generations people have feared leprosy, attaching severe social stigma to people who have the disease. Thousands of patients are rejected by their families and friends and ostracized by the communities in which they live. The age-old prejudice associated with the disease continues to devastate those who are afflicted with leprosy. Poverty and lack of medical care compound the problems.