

# Impacting the community

**S**imon Watkinson reports on the haven of activity emanating from Vadathorasalur Hospital and Vocational Training Centre and interviews its Principal, John Washington.

I caught the early morning train from Madurai, Tamil Nadu – 300km away from the apostle Thomas's disembarkation point at Malabar, Kerala State in AD 52 – to Villapuram. During this five hour, 100 mile journey, the train meandered through an undulating landscape densely vegetated with paddy-fields, sugar cane, raggi seed (which is ground into a flour to constitute the poor man's staple), coconut and lime trees. On arrival in the blistering midday heat of Villapuram, I transferred to a TLM vehicle for the one hour drive to Vadathorasalur Hospital, which was the venue for the debut administering of Dapsone in 1966 by its Superintendent, Dr Robert Cochrane. Its collection of '20s and '30s buildings are scattered amongst a 38-acre mature parkland.

A host of Community Based Rehabilitation schemes, which have seen some 103 ex-patients return into the community by loaning them animals or goods

to set up their own businesses, have been run from the hospital since 1990 and to date, 51 students have received financial assistance to complete their studies.

A short walk from the hospital, a complex of laboratories and workshops constitute Vadathorasalur Vocational Training Centre (VTC), which was completed in 1999 and is the biggest of its kind in India. Here, 120 students follow both



**John Washington,**  
Principal of  
Vadathorasalur VTC

formal and non-formal courses, lasting from six months to two years, in dressmaking; motor vehicle mechanics; electrical engineering; computing and air conditioning/refrigeration. The Electrical Department recently received the Industrial Training Institute (ITI – Government recognised) accreditation and in August

2000 was selected as an official Examination Centre for external ITI students. Other departments will soon receive this accolade.

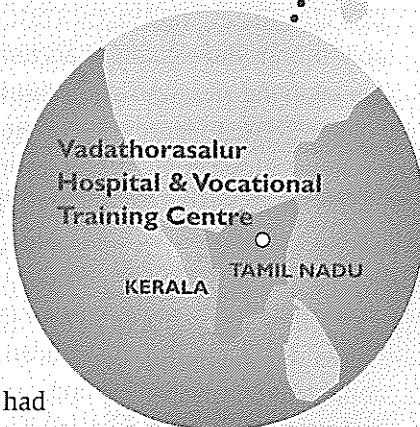
The next day, I had the pleasure of meeting John Washington, the VTC's Principal.

"I first heard about The Leprosy Mission when I lived in Manamadurai as my wife used to talk about it a lot. Then two years ago I saw this job advertised and thought that, as it required an engineering background, it would be a great challenge," he began, explaining his technical qualifications and global work experience. "I came here thinking that I would work on a part-time basis and stay for a year, but I felt so much compassion for leprosy affected students that I had to stay longer.

"Here students are challenged to make something of their lives. We train them for self-development so that they can have mental and social competence – more character-building and mental endurance classes will soon be introduced. Students have to work really hard here because it is such a competitive world, and their day starts at 5am when they go for a 4km run.

"I aim to establish some short-term job-orientated courses in welding, plumbing and wiring as there is definitely a market for these skills.

"We approach employers before trainees leave and I want at least 70% of them to be gainfully employed and properly rehabilitated. 'Hands-on' training in



**"Here students are challenged to make something of their lives."**

industrial placements is therefore essential to gain a knowledge of the latest technology.

"The well-being of the students here is a priority. I want this VTC to be appreciated by all in Tamil Nadu and we are now taking children from non-leprosy backgrounds whose fees are sponsored by both Rotary and Lions' Clubs. This is essential because it is debatable whether all the courses will in time be filled by leprosy affected candidates," he stressed.

"Perhaps one of the most exciting projects here is our recent venture into bandage gauze manufacture. Three people now oversee production – this supplies



**Students of cutting and tailoring**

seventeen hospitals in Southern India and really has potential to become self-sustaining.

"I love this job," he enthused, "especially handing on technical skills, and I'm grateful for the

**"We must not backslide on our achievements to date."**

a wealth of talent into an ever-expanding Indian economy, Mr Washington is not complacent.

"We must not backslide on our achievements to date. The work we are doing with leprosy affected

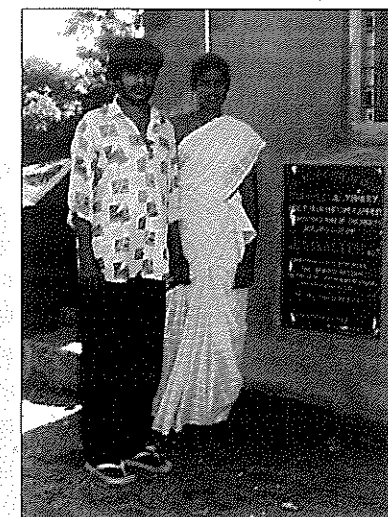
**"I love this job...and I'm grateful for the encouragement TLM has given me."**

people is extremely worthwhile, but in future I'd also like to incorporate those from poor backgrounds – to train them, teach them self-supporting skills and get them into the mainstream of life so that they can become socially integrated. From next year we will introduce aptitude testing and provide counselling to certain students, perhaps from broken or poverty-stricken homes who may suffer from depression or have communication difficulties and need interpersonal skills' training," he told me as the interview ended.

Just adjacent to the hospital entrance, the Wellesley Bailey Society for the handicapped was also founded to help the disadvantaged, in July 1999. It immediately started microcellular rubber (MCR) shoe manufacture for leprosy patients and now supplies TLM projects and the Government. Its mission statement reads:

*"...to strive hard to bring light to those who are in darkness and to bring cheer to those who are in distress. Our aim is to boost the morale of cured leprosy patients and other handicapped persons, for their overall improvement in life."*

The Vadathorasalur complex is certainly impacting the local community, both in terms of job creation and Christian witness. St Thomas is definitely smiling about these wonderful achievements. ■



**Leprosy patients Murugan and Sumathi met at the Wellesley Bailey Society and married last April. Their marriage expenses were met by the society.**