

# PORTRAITS OF COURAGE



STORIES OF  
BAPTIST HEROES



Julie Whidden Long

# LEENA LAVANYA “BAPTIST MOTHER TERESA”



(Photo courtesy of Roy O'Bryan)

**Who:** Leena Lavanya

**Where:** India

**When:** Present

**What she does:** Cares for the poor and outcast of her community

**L**eena Lavanya rises early in the morning to pray before she has breakfast and gets ready for her day. By 8:30 a.m., she is working. She visits the village school for poor children. She then travels nearby to the sewing school for their mothers and other women. At another school that she began, she checks on the older students learning how to use computers to find jobs. After lunch, she visits the **AIDS hospice** and the **leper colony**, and cares for individuals who need her help.

Leena has dinner before driving to one of the surrounding villages to visit with the people there. She also teaches their preachers. After a worship service or meeting,

Leena spends time with the village people and lays her hands on those who seek her special touch and prayer. She returns home after midnight to go to bed and get rest for tomorrow, another day of ministry to those who need her most.

Who is this Leena? Leena Lavanya is an Indian woman who works with the poorest people of her state of Andhra Pradesh, India. She has begun ministries for many groups of people who need her assistance—AIDS patients, people with leprosy, street kids and their desperate mothers, village people, and uneducated, unskilled youth and adults. These people are the ones who many people in Leena's community will not even talk to or associate with, much less help. Leena has offered her life in service to others. She lives without much money or many things so that others may have a better life.

**AIDS** is a disease that attacks the immune system, making it difficult for the infected person to fight off illness. No cure for AIDS currently exists.

**Hospice** is a facility in which dying people can get medical treatment that helps them to be comfortable and die with dignity. Rather than providing a cure, hospice treatment relieves suffering and improves the quality of life for patients.

A **leper colony** is a home for people with leprosy. People with leprosy have been cast out from society because the disease creates visible disfigurement and has been believed to be highly contagious. Effective medical treatment for leprosy now exists.

Leena grew up as a Baptist in India. Her great-grandfather became a Christian after learning about Jesus from an American Baptist missionary. Her family influenced her



to serve others as Christ served. Leena was raised by her grandparents, following an Indian tradition that firstborn children are often given to the grandparents as a gift of love. Leena's grandparents died when she was eighteen years old, and she returned to live with her parents in the town of Narasaraopet, where she still lives and works today.

When Leena moved to Narasaraopet, her life changed. Her grandparents had protected her, and she had grown up with many advantages. Her grandfather, B. R. Moses, taught Leena to serve poor people whom others overlooked. She remembered her grandfather caring for lepers, people carrying a disease that mangles their bodies and destroys their skin. Leena's father, Rathna Kumari, went to law school so that he could learn how to work for laws to help the poor.

As an adult, Leena worked as a biology teacher. She moved from a nice, safe home to a place of mud streets and worn-down settlements, and her eyes were opened



**I SURRENDER ALL**

All to Jesus, I surrender;  
All to Him I freely give;  
I will ever love and trust Him,  
In His presence daily live.

*I surrender all, I surrender all,  
All to Thee, my blessed Savior,  
I surrender all.*

All to Jesus I surrender;  
Humbly at His feet I bow,  
Worldly pleasures all forsaken;  
Take me, Jesus, take me now.

All to Jesus, I surrender;  
Make me, Savior, wholly Thine;  
Let me feel the Holy Spirit,  
Truly know that Thou art mine.

All to Jesus, I surrender;  
Lord, I give myself to Thee;  
Fill me with Thy love and  
power;  
Let Thy blessing fall on me.

All to Jesus I surrender;  
Now I feel the sacred flame.  
O the joy of full salvation!  
Glory, glory, to His Name!

Judson W. Van DeVenter, 1896

to all of the difficulties that her poor neighbors faced. She began to try to meet some of their needs by ministering to them in various ways.

In 1993, Leena traveled to Zimbabwe to attend a conference for youth sponsored by the Baptist World Alliance. While she was there, she attended a workshop led by Tony Campolo, an American Baptist preacher and teacher. Campolo challenged the group that while they often sang the hymn, "All to Jesus, I Surrender," few Christians ever surrendered very much. Leena decided then to take the words of that hymn seriously and to surrender her life to serving Christ by caring for the poorest people in India.

One day, while riding on a bus in her town, Leena met a woman who had no husband and no skills to find a good job. She could not provide food, shelter, and clothing for her children. Leena and her family decided to give up their own breakfast money for three months so that they could purchase a sewing machine for the woman. They bought the machine, taught the woman to sew, and gave her a way to earn a living.

When Leena saw how much of a difference that sewing machine made for the woman's family, she began a sewing school to help other poor women learn the skills needed to make a living. While they learned to sew, Leena told the women stories about Jesus. The women saw how Jesus' love had led others like Leena to care for them. The school has now taught over four hundred women to sew so that they can earn enough money to support their families.

Leena raised goats and sold their milk to make money for the school. She raised enough money so that the women who graduated from the school received new sewing machines. Then they could begin their own businesses and make money for their families.

As she worked with these poor women in her community, Leena learned that their children were not allowed to attend school because they did not know their fathers. Leena knew that these children would never escape poverty without an education. She began a school for the street children near her home.

The school grew so that 150 children were given a



*Leena visits children at their school*  
(Photo courtesy of Roy O'Bryan)

meal and basic education each day. The children learned the stories of Jesus. Their teachers showed the love and attention that they needed. Leena's school is in one of the poorest places in the world. Serve Trust Elementary School now has two teachers and over eighty children who are learning so that they might have a new way of life.

As Leena walked along the street one day, she noticed a dirty, ragged beggar on the side of the road. Many had passed by, but Leena was the first person to stop. As she helped the woman get up and get to the hospital, Leena learned that this woman had HIV/AIDS, a disease that weakened her body so that it could not fight off sickness.


Because no cure for AIDS exists, this woman would eventually die.

Leena knew that AIDS sufferers do not receive the help they need because many people are scared to be near them. Even relatives and friends will disown the people with AIDS because they are afraid they will catch the disease. In that way, AIDS sufferers are like those with leprosy. Leena began a hospice facility for AIDS patients, a place that they could go to receive medical care that would ease their pain and allow them to feel loved. Each month, around 110 AIDS patients come to Leena for medicine and food. Although she is not a doctor, she can give them vitamins that will help them feel better. This help is not enough for

the patients to become healthy, but Leena offers what she can and keeps them from being abandoned and lonely.

Leena has begun many other ministries to help the people of South India. She ministers to lepers who have been abandoned, much like AIDS patients, by their families and communities. She began a computer school for unemployed youth so that they could develop skills and find jobs. She leads a village outreach ministry, preaching and sharing God's love with the villagers. She stands up for the rights of women and the poor. When a tsunami hit Southeast Asia in December 2005, Leena was the first person to reach four Indian villages with food. In 2007, Leena and her Serve Trust ministries received the Mahatma Gandhi award for the most effective non-governmental





**Mother Teresa** was a Catholic nun. For over forty years, she ministered to the needs of the poor, sick, orphaned, and dying in Calcutta, India. She won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 for her humanitarian work.

organization for her work with the poor of society.

Two things motivate Leena's life of service to the poor. The first is her love for God, and the second is her love for poor and helpless people. She has been called a "**Baptist Mother**

**Teresa,**" named after the Catholic nun who was known around the world for serving the poor in the name of Jesus. Leena's ministries are also becoming recognized around the world because they have been so effective in providing for the needs of the poor.

Why is Leena Lavanya a Baptist hero? She is a hero because she has read the Bible and learned about Jesus' care for the poor. She has committed her own life to modeling the life of Jesus, and she has given herself to the work of Jesus in the world. Her Baptist faith and Baptist family taught her to serve others, and she has taken that calling seriously.

Leena Lavanya has found that she can serve God in her own community. By serving the poorest of the poor, she gives them hope. By showing them a picture of freedom, Leena is painting a new portrait of life for the people of India.

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STORIES OF BAPTIST HEROES

Written by Julie Whidden Long, this 128-page book, designed especially for younger youth and older children, presents the stories of Baptist heroes. These heroes lived in various countries and centuries and represent many phases of Baptist life. By highlighting the biographical dimension of the Baptist past, these inspiring stories help readers appreciate the personal contributions of heroic Baptist men and women.



Rev. Julie Whidden Long is the pastor of First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Georgia. She previously served as minister of children and families (2005–2013) and associate pastor (2013–2018) at FBCX Macon. Additionally, Rev. Long was the associate director of Baptist Women in Ministry (2018–2019) and launched a coaching and consulting practice in 2020. A native of Fitzgerald, Georgia, she is a two-time graduate of Mercer University, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Christianity and History from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in 2002 and a Master of Divinity from McAfee School of Theology in 2005. She is married to Jody Long, executive coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Georgia, and they have two children.