

# Destination Asia: A Sabbatical Profile

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Dr Charles Nienkirchen is Professor of Christian History and Spirituality. He is an explorer of non-western Christian traditions. During his recent sabbatical he followed the trail of the first-century Apostle Thomas to India's Malabar Coast.

The shifting of the world's attention to the Orient, the lure of non-western, ancient civilizations linked to the roots of humanity and a personal quest to investigate the tradition of the first century Apostle Thomas' dramatic, missionary exploits in South India converged to determine the Asiatic direction of my recent sabbatical itinerary. My travels in Thailand, Cambodia, India, Nepal and Tibet served up a potpourri of the diverse and often conflicting political, economic and religious realities which constitute Asia.

Few western Christians readily identify India as an ancient Christian heartland. Indian Christians however, make the exclusive claim that the Apostle Thomas came to the Malabar Coast (Kerala) in 52 CE. As Visiting Professor in Residence at Tamilnadu Theological Seminary in Madurai, South India, I was able to do library and field research pertinent to the South Indian apostolate of Thomas. I picked up his trail in the paradisiac state of Kerala, a tropical region of surf-pounded, sandy beaches, verdant, monsoon-fed rainforests and idyllic, tranquil backwaters. Seven present-day congregations of Syrian Christians and a mysterious 'half-church' trace their lineage to Thomas. The 7½ churches are key stops on an energetic pilgrimage itinerary for modern Thomas Christians.

I return to the classroom with the following 'Manifesto for My Students':

1. Be an enlightened, astute observer of the rapidly-changing developments in world history.
2. Be a conscientious internationalist in your moral, humanitarian commitments to the betterment of humankind.
3. Be an empowered, service-oriented, follower of Jesus Christ who no longer thinks patronizingly of the church as composed of 'the west' and 'the rest'.
4. Be an authentic, joyful practitioner of a spirituality which is anchored in prayer, and apocalyptically aware of the cosmic conflict between light and darkness.
5. Be a passionate recipient of the gift of life and live it to the glory of God for the good of humanity.

—Dr Charles Nienkirchen

*Dr Nienkirchen received the Alberta Ministry for Advanced Education 2006 Award of Distinction: Internationalizing the Teaching and Learning Practice. For more information on his educational travel experiences check his website at [www.downancientpaths.com](http://www.downancientpaths.com).*