Formally organized during the 1963 ADA convention, the Christian Dental Society has welcomed Christian dentists of all denominations who are interested in offering their skills to help our international brethren.

The primary purpose of the CDS is to publicize and facilitate dental mission trips for its members and others. CDS member services include inexpensive rental of equipment and instruments, information regarding upcoming trips, and mentoring of dental students and new dentists in the exciting field of missionary dentistry. 52 mission trips during the past year have included CDS equipment, and hundreds of additional trips around the world involved its members.

Conditions can vary greatly from one mission trip location to another. At some mission sites, teams utilize established clinics that have access to electricity and running water. Other trips to less developed areas require participants to carry their equipment and supplies on their backs from village to village. To meet these challenges, CDS has an inventory of efficient, lightweight portable dental equipment, including chairs, headlights, handpieces and sterilization systems.

In addition to facilitating mission trip opportunities, the CDS hosts an annual conference for its members and their families. Past speakers at these conferences have included Jim and Naomi Rhode, Dr. Van Haywood and Dr. Pascal Magne, as well as a host of highly experienced missionary dentists with some amazing stories to tell. Following are three snapshots of CDS efforts around the globe:
In 1979, while in college, Jim Carney enjoyed a vacation in Montego Bay, Jamaica. Desiring to return, yet unwilling to merely enjoy all the island had to offer, he pondered, “What might I be able to do to help the wonderful people of Jamaica?” After completing dental school at the University of Iowa, he responded to an appeal from the Christian Dental Society to offer free dental services in Jamaica. Little did he know at the time just how involved he would eventually become.

Since that time, Dr. Carney, a past CDS president who practices in Lombard, IL, has made over 60 trips to Jamaica. He has also established seven dental clinics in various areas of the country, enabling close to a hundred dentists to share in this much-needed work. In addition, over 200 dental students from schools such as Iowa, Temple, the University of Pittsburgh, Michigan and the Medical College of Virginia have joined Dr. Carney on his trips. They have enjoyed an excellent opportunity to greatly expand their dental knowledge and skills, working under experienced doctors, on patients who are most grateful for their services.

As Dr. Carney recently reflected on his many trips over the years, he commented, “I still love the people and feel energized each and every time I go.” Many of his trips are a family affair, involving his wife Sue, who is also a dentist, and their daughters Kelly and Madeline, who have developed into most capable assistants. Dr. Carney describes this as “quality family time at its best.”

The Jamaican clinic that Dr. Carney’s established have given other dentists the opportunity to treat patients without having to transport their own equipment. Dr. John Drescher, a veteran of 17 trips to Jamaica, is particularly thankful for the clinics. “They make it easier for me to go on missions to Jamaica,” states Dr. Drescher. “Things are more organized, and the clinics help us to establish a relationship with people in the community. The gratefulness of the patients we have treated has made me realize that we are really performing a much needed service, and that we are appreciated and loved.”
Retirement in Cambodia

In 1993 Dr. Frank Cho was in private practice in Bell Garden, California. He received a CDS newsletter including an article inviting members to consider relocating to Cambodia to help meet drastic dental needs. The article inspired Dr. Cho to set his sights on early retirement.

Eleven years later, in 2004, Dr. Cho and his wife Tina arrived in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. As they were learning the language and culture, they also began setting up a dental clinic. Initially they offered basic services such as extractions, fillings and cleanings. Soon they were able to provide root canal treatment, which would have previously required a trip to Thailand. Eventually a denture lab was set up, enabling them to offer full and partial denture treatment to the poor.

As news of the dental clinic spread, demand for treatment grew rapidly. To help meet this need, Frank and Tina began training local Cambodians in assisting and hygiene services. They are currently training six eager Cambodians to staff a crown and bridge laboratory. Dr. Cho also teaches each Saturday at a nearby dental school, one of two in Cambodia.

About six times a year the Chos travel into rural areas of Cambodia, providing care for those who cannot travel to the clinic. Sometimes they are accompanied by short-term missionaries from other countries, allowing them to greatly increase their dental outreach. Dr. Tom Love, an oral surgeon from Oakland, California, and his wife Holly, have been on four such trips to rural Cambodia. Their most recent trip included a physician, two general dentists, one oral surgeon, one chiropractor, two nurses, and three support people. “It is clear to me that they (Dr. and Mrs. Cho) are very dedicated to what they are doing,” says Dr. Love. “They offer care to a lot of people – the poor, local missionaries, and even those living great distances from the clinic they established.”
Helping Needy Nationals Treat their Own People

In parts of Africa, Asia and South America, the demand for dental services is so great that traditional missionary efforts only help a fraction of the population. In these areas, CDS dentists are working to train members of indigenous communities to perform basic dental procedures. Since 2004, 30 such trips have been made to twelve different countries, including Kenya, Uganda, Peru, India, Nigeria and Ghana.

Dr. Charlie Vittitow, a dentist from Louisville, Kentucky and a veteran of 20 trips so far, has seen firsthand the amazing capacity of nationals from third world countries to treat their fellow citizens. Prior to his involvement in training nationals, he had been on several mission trips which left him greatly frustrated at leaving so many people untreated because of the great needs that existed. His frustration inspired him to help design this dental training program. “If we want to meet the overwhelming demand for dental services around the world,” Charlie states, “our only hope is to train nationals for this purpose.”

These specially designed “mini dental schools” consist of intensive training, usually requiring a translator to help impart large quantities of information in a short time period. A nonverbal training video helps the educational process. Due to the brevity of the training during these trips, follow-up trips are planned to each location 6-12 months later.

Dr. Denis Scharine, a dentist from Fremont, Wisconsin and a past CDS president, has been on ten training trips to eight different countries. “It turns out that the potential of this approach for helping the people is huge,” he says. “There’s nothing more exciting than knowing that, because of this training, dental treatment continues long after we are gone. Also, with locals doing the treatment, there’s no language barrier.”
Why We Go…?

Hopefully the preceding stories, focusing on the work of three ministries of the Christian Dental Society, have given a taste of the opportunities that exist to offer dental skills to the dentally underserved around the world. The ultimate goal of the CDS is to be a testimony to a loving God, who desires to show His love to people of every tribe and nation. Free dental care is offered to everyone possible, regardless of their religious beliefs. Those who receive treatment are also given an opportunity to learn about the inherent joy and peace that can be found through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Any dentists, hygienists, and assistants desiring more information regarding CDS membership and mission trip opportunities are invited to visit the CDS website at www.christiandental.org. In addition, the home office may be reached by calling 563-578-8887 or e-mailing cdssent@netins.net.

William T. Griffin, DDS, has practiced dentistry in Newport News, Virginia since 1983. Dr. Griffin is a graduate of the Medical College of Virginia School of Dentistry, and spends 3-4 weeks per year on dental mission trips. He is also the President of the Board of a Christian free medical-dental clinic in Yorktown, VA. Dr. Griffin is a member of the American Dental Association, the Virginia Dental Association, the Christian Dental Society, the Christian Medical-Dental Associations, and the International College of Dentists. He is a Past President of the Christian Dental Society, and may be reached at williamgriffindds@gmail.com. For information on upcoming dental mission trips, check out www.dentalmissiontrips.com.