

That girl who prays: Chloe and the Gypsies

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [November 18, 2008](#) issue

When A Banjara Indian woman named Mary came to our church to talk to us, nine-year-old Chloe was there. Chloe had to be there. We could not let Chloe miss a chance to meet a Banjara woman, because Chloe had been praying for the Banjara for four years.

The Banjara of India are one of three major Gypsy groups in the world. As a very low-caste people, millions of Banjara live without running water or electricity. Mary told us it takes about \$450 to support a Banjara pastor and family for one year and that amount allows the family to live well and within the expectations of their culture. That is also enough money to support a microbusiness that helps their village in very tangible ways.

Mary loves to cook, so she came to my house after worship and prepared a fabulous chicken curry meal for a number of people in our church. We all sat around the kitchen, watching her prepare the curry according to her family recipe. We asked all sorts of questions and peered into the pots. It was like having our own cooking show.

Our church first heard of the Banjara when we met some Baptist missionaries who were working with the indigenous Christian churches among the Banjara. The following Sunday, five-year-old Chloe raised her hand during prayer request time on Sunday morning and asked if we might pray for the Gypsies. Chloe didn't know that Banjara was the preferred name for these people, but we knew what she meant.

We pray for pretty much anything children ask us to pray for. We pray for puppies and kitties and exams and dance lessons. We once prayed for a sick hermit crab. So when Chloe asked us to pray for the Banjara Gypsies, we did. The next Sunday she asked again. And the Sunday after that. It got kind of funny. Chloe would raise her hand and everyone would smile. Some of the older kids would snicker. But nothing stopped Chloe. She kept praying for the Gypsies, Sunday after Sunday. Her request stopped being something we even thought about. Praying for the Gypsies became a

normal part of our worship.

In the early years I worried a little about how this sounded to visitors. A girl raises her hand and says, “Pray for the Gypsies” and no one bats an eye. I tried to explain the situation to visitors a few times, but for some reason I don’t have the energy for that anymore. I don’t know what people think. I guess they think we pray for Gypsies.

So you can see why Chloe had to be there that day to eat lunch with Mary. She stared at Mary in wonder and awe. *This* was one of the fabled and famous Banjara Gypsies. And she was getting to eat Banjara food. I remember thinking, “There will be no stopping this girl now.”

In the early days Chloe was praying, in part, because it made her the center of attention for a moment. She liked the response of the congregation. She was five, and that’s how five-year-old children think. She prayed through that stage, and then prayed herself right into a meal with Mary. After that Chloe seemed to understand that the Banjara are real people.

Inspired by Chloe, the children of our church began collecting money on Sunday mornings by dropping coins and bills into a purse sewn by a Banjara woman. When they have saved \$450, our treasurer mails a check to Mary’s family, who cash it and distribute the money to Banjara pastors. Currently 40 such pastors ride bicycles from village to village, doing good and working with their people. Many of these pastors have purchased cows that produce milk for the children of their villages. Chloe’s prayers turned an idea into a longstanding tradition. Sending money to the Banjara in India has been part of our worship for years.

Meanwhile, Chloe kept praying. In her middle school years, she went through an understandable phase where she seemed unhappy and even a little sullen some Sundays. I wondered if she regretted becoming “that girl who always prays for the Gypsies.” I think her reputation and the expectation of the church got her through. Once you’ve prayed for the Gypsies for six or seven years, it’s kind of hard to stop, if only because people seem to be waiting for something from you. Prayer time comes and people lean forward and wait. There is a pause, then: “Pray for the Gypsies.” Everyone settles back and relaxes.

I wrote a short piece about Chloe years ago on my blog. Later, a visitor came to the church and asked, “Where is that girl who always prays for the Gypsies?” I pointed

at Chloe. His eyes moved down to the bright pink rubber boots she was wearing. He looked at me as though I might provide some answer for this.

I shrugged. "She wears pink rubber boots every Sunday and prays for Gypsies. What can I possibly know about these things or the mysterious ways of the Lord?"

Chloe prayed herself into high school. She is a beautiful young woman now, and yes, she still asks to pray for the Banjara on Sundays, though she doesn't wear the pink boots anymore. She's been praying for the Banjara for ten years. She's prayed through being embarrassed about the whole thing, and now it seems kind of cool to her again. Mary and I keep in touch, and she's been back to the church to talk to us. I don't know how many \$450 checks we've sent to India. I don't know any details about the pastors our money supports. That's another part of God's work. Ours is to love Chloe, pray for the Banjara and let our children drop money into the bag.