



LUD CONFERENCE:

A PLATFORM FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE IN HEALTH, SOCIAL, AND EDUCATION SECTORS

The LUD Conference, coordinated by CSIM (Centre for Social Initiative and Management), opened with a powerful keynote address by **Dr. Sumathi Narayanan**, who set the tone for the event by emphasising the value of diverse perspectives. She highlighted the importance of fostering emotional, social, and collective consciousness while urging participants to distinguish meaningful "voices" from mere "noise" when tackling societal challenges.

Panel Discussions: Insights and Solutions Across Key Sectors

1) **Health Panel:** Moderated by Dr. Kumarbabu, the health panel featured insightful contributions:

- **Dr. Sudhakar** shared his inspiration for working in child development, underscoring the importance of youth involvement in addressing invisible disabilities such as autism, ADHD, and OCD.
- **Mr. Ameer Khan** explored the intersection of health and socio-economic factors, stressing that health is a fundamental right. He also addressed the prevalence of issues like tuberculosis and the commercialised nature of the medical industry.
- **Dr. Shiny**, a nutritionist, advocated for holistic health by emphasising the interplay of physical, mental, emotional, and environmental well-being. She encouraged a lifestyle anchored in a balanced diet, quality sleep, and regular exercise.

2) **Social Panel:** Dr. Sudha moderated the social panel, which spotlighted sustainability and gender equality:

- Mr. Dawood highlighted sustainability challenges, advocating for conscious consumerism and improved recycling practices to combat environmental pollution.
- Mr. Balakrishnan addressed gender equality, challenging stereotypes and societal-imposed norms. He emphasised the importance of educating boys early about shared household responsibilities and fostering gender equity in everyday life.

3) **Education Panel:** Under the moderation of Dr. Balaji Sampath, the education panel tackled systemic educational issues:

- Ms. Chandra from EFL referenced alarming

statistics from the ASER report, which revealed that 40% of 8th graders in rural areas struggle with basic literacy, highlighting the urgent need for interventions.

- Mr. Karthik from Srishti Village shared his innovative approach to integrated education, which includes engaging disabled children in farming activities to foster learning and inclusion.
- Mr. Sriram of SVRCC spoke about his organisation's initiatives to educate children of convicts and juvenile delinquents, stressing the role of society in supporting marginalised groups.

Changemakers' Stories: Inspiring Journeys of Resilience

The conference also featured personal stories of changemakers who have turned challenges into opportunities for impact:

- **Arun Fernandez** recounted his struggles with dyslexia and his journey to advocate for and support children with learning disabilities.
- **Logammal** shared her success in leading children's parliaments, which have effectively lobbied for community needs, including the closure of a liquor shop in her village.
- **Ponni**, a transgender activist, spoke about her journey to establish a dance school in Tuticorin, shedding light on the hurdles she faced in gaining societal acceptance and creating a space for inclusivity.

A Call for Collective Action

The conference concluded with an address by **Mr. Jayashankar** of the Tribal Welfare Society, who discussed his efforts to mainstream Narikurava children into regular schools. He also highlighted his advocacy for securing Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for the Narikurava community to ensure greater opportunities and recognition.

The LUD Conference brought together an array of voices, sparking dialogue on pressing issues across health, social, and education sectors. By spotlighting innovative solutions and transformative efforts, the conference inspired participants to take actionable steps toward driving change in their communities.

Marie Banu



“To inspire youth, we need to give them ownership and leadership opportunities.”

Fr. Lijo Thomas shares with Marie Banu about Let Us Dream initiative

Fr. Lijo Thomas is a visionary leader and community builder committed to empowering individuals through education and service. As the founder of the Let Us Dream initiative, he inspires changemakers worldwide by fostering collaboration and promoting impactful grassroots efforts. His work combines spiritual guidance with practical solutions, emphasising inclusivity and social responsibility.

Fr. Lijo's expertise in motivational theory led to the creation of the DREAMS framework, helping individuals achieve personal and community transformation. With a background in theology and a passion for nurturing youth leadership, he continues to inspire action and innovation, building a global network of compassionate doers.

In an exclusive interview Fr. Lijo Thomas shares with Marie Banu about Let Us Dream initiative.

What inspired you to initiate Let Us Dream?

Let Us Dream was inspired by Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, whose vision of setting goals, working hard, and achieving dreams deeply resonated with me. Initially, as a shy and reserved person, I struggled with confidence. My journey took a transformative turn when I joined a college music band. Performing inspirational songs and speaking about aspirations combined purpose with fun. This phase was foundational in developing the project's core philosophy.

Over time, what began as music-based motivational sessions transitioned into more structured, theory-backed initiatives during my doctoral studies. With guidance from my professor, Dr. Pauline Leonard, we conceptualised the DREAMS framework: Desire, Readiness, Empowerment, Action, and Mastery. Each stage incorporates intrinsic and extrinsic motivational theories to help participants achieve lasting change.

The project matured into a community-driven effort, involving college students and volunteers to empower middle-school children. The evolution of this initiative has been a testament to the power of shared goals and collaboration.

How did the Let Us Dream conference come about, and why do you emphasise keeping it small and free?

The conference stemmed from the realisation that many individuals and organisations were engaged in impactful community service but lacked a platform to share their stories and connect with like-minded doers. The concept of the conference was simple: bring together people making a difference, not for accolades, but for mutual inspiration and learning.

We keep the conference small and free because intimate gatherings foster genuine connections. When we go bigger, it is expensive and complex. People cannot afford it. So I wanted it to be very, very small because small is very powerful.

Sitting in a circle, participants can engage more deeply than in a large auditorium setting. The lack of a fee ensures inclusivity, enabling anyone passionate about community service to participate without financial barriers. This format allows for meaningful interactions and creates a unique space where experiences and ideas are exchanged.

How did the conference expand from one location to



multiple cities and countries? What challenges did you face?

The first Let Us Dream conference took place at Louisiana Tech University in 2017. Its success inspired interest from other institutions, leading to an invitation from Binghamton University in New York. However, logistical challenges such as travel and accommodation costs prompted a shift in the model. Instead of hosting the same conference in different locations, we encouraged local communities to create their versions, making each conference independent yet aligned with the shared vision.

The biggest challenge was ensuring consistency in purpose and quality across locations. To address this, we established core committees in each city, created detailed manuals, and aligned all events with common goals. This decentralised model empowered local communities while maintaining the integrity of the Let Us Dream ethos.

How many conferences have been conducted so far, and what is the scale of participation?

Since its inception, the Let Us Dream conference series has seen significant growth. In the U.S., each conference attracts around 150 participants on average, while in India, events draw 400–500 attendees. Over six years, this translates to thousands of participants across multiple locations.

We deliberately rotate hosting duties among institutions to foster collaboration and mutual learning. Each institution brings its unique culture and practices to the event, enriching the experience for everyone involved. This dynamic approach not only broadens the reach but also nurtures best practices across institutions.

What role do universities play in the success of Let Us Dream conferences?

Universities are pivotal to the success of these conferences because they house the richest human resources—students and faculty. These institutions provide not only the venue but also a pool of

enthusiastic and innovative individuals who drive the events.

By rotating hosting responsibilities, we encourage universities to collaborate, learn from each other, and implement best practices. This exchange fosters a culture of cooperation and continuous improvement, enriching both the conferences and the institutions involved.

How do you sustain volunteer interest and ensure long-term commitment?

Sustaining volunteer interest hinges on two key factors: the perceived impact of their work and the opportunities for networking and growth. When volunteers see tangible outcomes, such as participants sharing life-changing experiences, it fuels their passion and commitment. The conferences also provide a platform for volunteers to connect with like-minded individuals and organisations, broadening their horizons.

We make a conscious effort to give volunteers ownership of their roles, ensuring they feel valued and credited for their contributions. Testimonials, peer recognition, and opportunities to share their stories further reinforce their sense of purpose and belonging.

How can we inspire more youth to engage with initiatives like Let Us Dream?

To inspire youth, we need to give them ownership and leadership opportunities. Young people are more likely to commit when they feel their ideas and efforts are valued. Beyond events, continuous engagement through storytelling, peer-led initiatives, and showcasing real impact can keep their interest alive.

Social media plays a vital role in amplifying their contributions, allowing them to share their experiences and inspire others. Youth are naturally drawn to causes where they can see tangible results and feel part of a larger movement. By fostering a sense of community and shared purpose, we can motivate them to stay involved long-term.