

Report on a visit to Papua New Guinea 16-20 April 2011 Partnership Coordinator Asia/Pacific – Steve Pearce

Aims

- To meet with the Moderator
- To visit the Moderator-designate and the Papuan Islands Region
- To visit the United Church College of Higher Education

Background

Methodist missionaries arrived in PNG in 1870 from Fiji. The United Church of Papua New Guinea (UCPNG) was formed in 1970, uniting the Methodist and LMS (London Missionary Society) traditions. UCPNG now has 600,000 members ('1 Million if you count the children'). There are eleven 'regions' each led by a bishop with overall leadership given by the Moderator and the Assembly. The church went through a financial crisis in the 1990s after the collapse of its business enterprise. MCB has offered financial support as part of the ongoing partnership and is currently partnering the rehabilitation and development of UCPNG educational institutions.

Papua New Guinea is the largest country in the South Pacific with a population of 6.5 million. Recent discoveries of huge natural gas deposits represent huge wealth potential for a few and even bigger social problems for most.

Papuan Islands Region

The UCPNG Moderator, Revd Sir Samson Lowa, has been a deeply spiritual leader and a great contributor to the partnership with MCB. Revd Bernard Siai has been elected by the Assembly to succeed him and takes office in October 2012; he is currently bishop of the Papuan Islands Region.

I responded to the invitation to visit this region as it is remote and receives few visitors, as a way of getting to know the moderator-elect and as a means to report on the very different way of life in most of our Pacific partners.

I journeyed in the company of Bishop Bernard and Dr Api Maha, Director of the United Church College of Higher Education (UCOHE). We left the Solomon Islands, where we had been attending the Methodist Consultative Council of the Pacific, stayed overnight in Port Moresby, flew to Alotau the next morning, drove two hours to East Cape at the very eastern end of Papua (where we were met by the local congregation), went by dinghy for two hours across the sea to Henderson Island (bumpy but the dolphins looked happy) and finally at nightfall walked a kilometre through the rain from the wharf to the village of Salamo and the sanctuary of the old missionary house, now the women's fellowship guesthouse. The morning began at four when the first village prayer meeting began, though I did not stir until the headmaster announced over the school tannoy (audible through the entire village) that it was six o'clock (the implication was obvious). Emerging into the dawn light, I found a scene that would fit many people's idea of a tropical paradise; a kingfisher sat on a frangipani tree covered with white flowers while a humming bird was attending to bright yellow blooms on a bush below. The houses are small and battered, most other buildings date back to the missionary era 1930-1970, their gardens tidy and colourful.



Devotions in the regional office were attended by the members of staff responsible for administration, children/youth, health, Christian education, HIV/AIDS, the community health worker training school and (the only westerner) project management. We sang and prayed together, and listened to reflections on 'every stone will cry'. I introduced myself and my work, reflecting on the fact that the hymnbook we had been using had been published from City Road in London where I habitually worship – a far cry indeed from Salamo in so many ways. Looking round the office, which also hosts the island's Post Office, I see that IT consists of two typewriters and a Gestetner duplicating machine and mobile phones, though the only place to get a signal is the hill behind the primary school; there is electricity on Monday, Wednesday & Friday in the afternoons. The region covers about 30 circuits on about 30 islands. The common language in this region is English and provides a good possibility for volunteers and maybe longer-term placements.

United Church College of Higher Education (UCOHE)

The aim of this college is to rationalise four national level institutions, achieve formal government recognition of UCOHE and thereby access government funding for the education and health components, these being current government priorities. Education is the priority for the UCPNG's partnership with MCB. I have now visited all four institutions.

Raronga Theological College is rebuilding its infrastructure and is into the second year of its new curriculum. It is formalising its links with the Assembly and with the regional, certificate level training schools which 8 of the regions run independently. A Masters course will begin here within the next two years. Offers of visiting, qualified teachers would be welcomed, perhaps a sabbatical opportunity for ministers from Britain or Ireland. The headquarters of UCOHE will be based here.

Gaulim Teacher Training College is a long-standing institution on New Britain, producing teachers for church and government schools and offering the opportunity for serving teachers to upgrade their qualifications.

The Skills and Leadership Centre offers a variety of lay training courses, including youth and women's ministry, chaplaincy and biblical studies. The Centre is moving from small premises on New Britain to a larger site at East Central Region, nearer the capital.

The Community Health Worker Training School at Salamo currently has 52 students on a two-year course, when qualified most of these young men and women will find jobs at rural health centres. There are plans to develop a nurse training course if bids for government support and funding are successful.

The Pacific Life

I came back from three weeks in the Pacific with some very mixed feelings. The Good News of Christianity has brought great benefits to island life. All the islands are now either officially or unofficially 'Christian nations' and cherish Christian standards and outlooks. Several of these nations cherish the coming of Christianity as the time when they turned from the darkness of a warring, conflict-ridden lifestyle to one of peace and harmony. It is painfully clear however that that the influence of the West has also brought, and increasingly continues to bring, economic exploitation, crime, climate change and unhealthy influences on young people and family life. The struggle to work with the good and resist the bad is an unequal one. It is made more difficult by the inability of the West to see and hear the life-enhancing insights of Pacific culture and perspective and see only the rightness of the more 'professional', 'modern' and 'realistic' approaches of the West. WCR exists to ensure that MCB sees itself as part of a worldwide Church and in, but not of, the West.

*Steve Pearce
24 April 2011*