

Report on a visit to Sri Lanka

15-22 February 2019

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Aims

- To make a visit to Mission Partner, Anne Baldwin
- To meet staff and students at the Theological College of Lanka (TCL)
- To meet with the President of the Methodist Church Sri Lanka (MCSL)
- To meet with the General Secretary of National Christian Council (NCCSL)

Background

The **Methodist Church Sri Lanka (MCSL)** having been established by British missionaries over 200 years ago, the partnership between the Methodist Church in Britain (MCB) and Sri Lanka is close and multi-faceted, but changing considerably as grant aid diminishes and Mission Partners decline in number. MCSL has a membership of 30,000 and straddles the ethnic and geographical divides, which sever this country of 20 million people. Sri Lanka is in a tense political situation at the moment and elections later this year could be significant. MCSL and NCCSL are engaged in events to help church members explore the issues and use their vote and democratic influence well.

The **Theological College of Lanka (TCL)** was inaugurated in 1963 by the Anglican, Methodist and Baptist churches (the Presbyterians joined later). The vision was formation within the Sri Lankan context, using the native languages, Sinhala and Tamil. Rev. Basil Jackson, a British Methodist Missionary, was the first principal having, until then, been the founding director of the Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue (EISD) in Colombo. Mission Partners have served at TCL through most of its life.

Partnership with the **National Christian Council** dates back to its founding over 100 years ago. It is a successful union of the historic denominations representing the churches at national level in dialogue with the government and other faiths, it also produces a vast range of material for radio, TV, school RE, congregational worship and local study groups.

State President Maithripata Sirisena has had a disappointing term of office and astonishingly attempted to dismiss the prime minister and dissolve parliament in November, appointing former president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, in his place. The Supreme Court declared this illegal and the political scene is tense ahead of elections later in the year.

Visit

On my arrival, I met Anne in Kandy, where we spent a couple of days together, taking time to review her time in Sri



Lanka, the situation at TCL and a variety of pastoral issues.

No visit to Kandy is complete without a visit to **Sri Dalada Maligawa** or the **Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic**. This is a Buddhist temple in the royal palace complex of the former Kingdom of Kandy, which houses the relic of the tooth of the Buddha. The relic has played an important political role since its arrival in Sri Lanka in the fourth century, because whoever holds the relic holds

the governance of the country, it is believed. Kandy was the last capital of the Sri Lankan kings and is a World Heritage Site mainly due to the temple.

We also spent some time at the college, Anne is pictured outside the dining hall which has been recently refurbished with help from the Methodist Church in Britain. We spent time here with both students and staff.

Anne plays an important role, helping pastorally, running one of the student fellowship groups, teaching English, assisting in the library and helping to edit documents written in English by both staff and students. She is clearly much appreciated by everyone.

All the teaching staff are under some pressure as the teaching faculty is seriously under-strength. A new principal has just been appointed, but will only work part-time until the end of the year, alongside Bishop Keerthi, Bishop of Kurunagala, who is acting principal. Many changes are in store and Anne carries a role of continuity and pastoral support during this difficult year of transition.



On travelling to Colombo I had two meetings with the Methodist President, Reverend Asiri and his wife. He has had a serious period of ill-health and is not yet fully back to work. We discussed the political situation and the efforts being

made by the Methodist Church in cooperation with the Roman Catholic Church, to hold advocacy meetings with local church members about issues and questions that Christians might consider when choosing how to exercise their vote later this year. We also discussed, among other things, the agricultural project we have been supporting, Navajeevanam, the new ministry among deaf people, his perspective as Chair of Governors at TCL, the new presidential manse and refurbishment of the HQ building.



My final meetings were with Revd Ebenezer Joseph, until recently General Secretary of NCCSL and now superintendent minister at Kollupitya, though still retaining an oversight role at the Christian Council until a new appointment is made. He

has received a scholarship grant from the Methodist Church in Britain's SALT programme in order to do some writing and reflecting in Australia on his years in the ministry of reconciliation, something many of NCC's partners have been requesting for some time. We also discussed the new CTBI project based in the North, called, **The Reconciled Land?** - A Theology of Land at the Nexus of God, People and the Environment. Its aim is 'Strengthening our ecumenical approach to reconciliation through theological reflection, social analysis, action learning and community based dialogues around issues of land through the perspectives of women, environment and peace.'

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