

Report on a visit to Church of North India

November 26 – December 4 2019

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Aims

- Represent MCB at the inaugural programme beginning the golden jubilee celebrations of the Church of North India (CNI).
- Participate with other international partners in the mission consultation as CNI begins its next Strategic Planning Process.
- Meet with CNI bishops and leaders, network with other international partners of CNI.
- Receive updates from CNI on partnership possibilities, Annual Grant, NMA grants, scholarships and twinnings as well as potential grant applications for 2020 and onwards. To also assess progress of Church Can project.

Background

CNI was formed in Nagpur on 29 November 1970 when these six churches became one, after a long process of negotiation.

- Methodist Church (British and Australian Conferences)
- Church of India, Burma and the Ceylon (Anglican)
- United Church of Northern India (Congregationalist and Presbyterian)
- Baptist Churches of Northern India (British Baptists)
- Church of the Brethren in India
- Disciples of Christ.

In the preparation document for this jubilee event, the CNI leadership says, *‘The journey has not been easy. As a church consisting mostly of people from rural areas; social, economic and political oppression based on caste, economic and religious identity, has been and continues to be our lived experience. Our women are victims of patriarchy. Our members are a persecuted religious minority facing a continually growing right-wing nationalism from fanatic religious groups and political fronts such as the Hindutva Parivar.’*

This Jubilee Year is being taken as a time to celebrate achievements, to assess the current situation and to agree on priorities for the coming decade. The reflection so far has included the following list of failings, *‘Our inability to transform the church into an inclusive community, our failure in translating the gospel imperative that “they all may be one in Christ” in our church life, our lack of interest in making the church administration transparent, democratic and corruption-free, obsession of our leadership with power, money, nepotism and unauthorized sale of property, and our reluctance to contextually reformulate our theology to transform our ministries of preaching, worship, service and mission.’*

CNI currently has 2.2 million members and is spread over 22 states, 14 of which have a population over 10 million and the largest has 200 million.

The city of Nagpur is known as the ‘city of oranges’ and is also regarded as the absolute centre of India.

More importantly perhaps, it is where the great Dr Ambedkar, architect of the Indian constitution, led a mass conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism in 1956. He saw it as the way to utterly reject the caste system as well as making 22 vows for his future life. Pilgrims still flock to the sacred monument of Deekshabhoomi where it happened. Unfortunately caste still blights the lives of millions of Indians and the issue was inevitably part of our Partners’ Meeting, where CNI (a majority Dalit church) began its consultation on the priorities for the next ten years.





The next day, balloons, flowers, dancers, fireworks and plenty of scattered petals sent a huge procession on its way. Traffic was halted as thousands of us processed through the city to the cathedral where, exactly 49 years ago, six church leaders entered through six separate doors to emerge a few hours later through one door, as a united church, the Church of North India.

A new monument was unveiled – the cover being lifted away by balloon! – and we gathered for joyful worship, Holy Communion and the consecration of a new bishop for Durgapur Diocese in the company of around 5,000 members of CNI. The priorities for the next decade will emerge from consultations over the rest of this jubilee year. As partners, we begin a dialogue about how we support them. The CNI leadership is committing itself to generating these priorities through consultation with its membership. During the Nagpur celebrations workshops were held separately with presbyters, laymen, laywomen, youth and children. Some broad issues became quickly clear such as the ministry of women, clergy housing and pensions and evangelism. The Moderator made a point of the need to work towards self-sustainability, what

this means is now up for debate, hopefully as a theme at the February S Asia partners meeting.

After travelling to Delhi, I spent the First Sunday in Advent at the Cathedral, joining in the festival of unity, Ekta Utsav. This annual celebration begins with an outdoor service of Holy Communion for about one thousand people and then thousands more arrive for a sort of glorified garden fete, each parish of the diocese as well as the diocesan schools has a stall and they sell food, crafts or run lucky dips, etc. To give you an idea of the scale, the first prize in the raffle was a car and the whole event raises enough money to pay all the



clergy stipends for a quarter.

Next, I had a day with the Delhi Brotherhood, a community within CNI, which is devoted to community work in the poorer parts of the huge city of Delhi. The Deenbandhu School is in a slum in the east of this city of 16 million people. It started 30 years ago when there was no educational opportunity for the children here. Now it is a successful primary and secondary school charging low, variable fees of about £5 per month. When the pupils go home in the early



afternoon, free classes are offered to about 100 children whose families cannot afford even that, or need the children to be available to work in the mornings to help the family make ends meet.

Next was a women's empowerment project run jointly with Delhi statutory authorities for women who find themselves subject to domestic violence or other abuse. Here they can find support, counselling and legal advice. The women's group I met were volunteer helpers who give assistance in their local communities and run awareness raising initiatives. They meet each week to talk about issues, sing and affirm each other – they are a great group.



Then at Child Line, I met Mr Yeshu Das, who has been working there for 20 years and is now the Director. This free helpline in Delhi started in 1998 and has already helped to rescue 5,000 children as well as giving help and advice to thousands of others. The most frequent causes for people to dial 1098 are abuse, child labour and missing children.

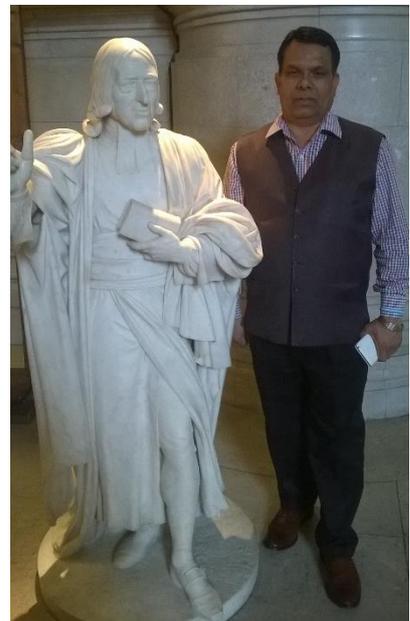
Yeshu told me that just recently they had rescued 22 children aged between 7 and 14 from a jeans factory.



They were all from one of India's poorest states, Bihar, and were working up to 23 hours a day, with insufficient food and beatings with hammers if they did anything wrong. There may be as many as 18 million people in modern slavery in India, some in bonded labour, children forced to beg in the streets, child soldiers and many trafficked sex workers. In this office which covers NE Delhi there are 12 staff who

provide a 24/7 service, some of them are pictured here with me. Their salaries are funded by the government now, but they are unfortunately paid very poorly, below the minimum wage in fact! Grants from the Church and others provide clothes, school books and other necessities for children in need. A truly daunting visit.

Next came an important day in the CNI HQ and discussions with the General Secretary. My role is often to remind united churches that Methodism is part of their heritage and make-up so I picture him here with John Wesley. We talked about the annual grant, scholarships and other partnership possibilities. We have some interesting National in Mission Appointments (NMAs) here such as the Coordinator of Mission



and Evangelism Concerns, Bishop Andrew. He gave up his diocese for this modestly paid post but has inspired many and trained over 230 evangelists, who are working in most of the dioceses. We also reviewed the 'Church Can' project in which All We Can is working on organizational development in one of the dioceses, Jabalpur. I also met with the local consultant for that project during my visit.

Other parts of our partnership with CNI include a District twinning link with Cuttack Diocese and Plymouth and Exeter District and a minister coming to spend part of her sabbatical with the Diocese of Delhi in February.

CNI has many educational institutions and wonders whether there might some experienced teachers of English Literature who would like to spend a year or two teaching in India, these posts are not always easy to fill, especially outside of the major cities.

As ever, I am grateful for gracious and plentiful hospitality from hosts in each place I visited.

