

Report on a visit to Sri Lanka

20 August - 4 September 2018

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Aims

- To make a first visit to Mission Partner, Anne Baldwin
- To make a final visit to Mission Partners, Raing and Mervyn McCullagh
- To chair the international partners meeting of the National Christian Council (NCCSL)
- To travel north with National in Mission Appointment (NMA), Ralston Weinmann

Background

The partnership between the Methodist Church in Britain (MCB) and Sri Lanka is both historic and close. The Methodist Church Sri Lanka (MCSL) was established by British missionaries over 200 years ago and now has a membership of around 30,000, with 45 circuit and 120 pastors across both sides of the ethnic and geographical divides, which sever this country of 20 million people. Sri Lanka is seen by some as the cradle of Buddhism and that religion takes a leading role in many ways; it is also being used as a tool to reinforce the 'victory' of the military in 2009 at the end of over 30 years of civil war. The North and East, mainly Tamil and mainly Hindu, parts of the country remain impoverished and frustrated, especially when compared to the predominately Sinhala and mainly Buddhist South.

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 dialogues 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.

Visit

On my arrival in Sri Lanka I was kindly met by Mervyn McCullagh and stayed with him and Raing in their Colombo flat. They have both had a successful time as Mission Partners over the last two years although it



has proved challenging to work within the well-established structures of NCCSL. Their placement is ending as the current General Secretary ends his term and the appointment of two Assistant General Secretaries effectively take over much of the work Mervyn and Raing had been doing in their role as consultants. Mervyn will take up a new, senior role with a church agency in London at the end of the year.

Anne Baldwin is MCB's new Mission Partner in Sri Lanka; she is working at the Theological College of Lanka (TCL) in Pilimatalawa, near Kandy, a little over two hours away from Colombo by express train. Anne made

the journey to Colombo to spend a couple of days with me. She has made a great start at the college, building on the useful experience she had there on MCB's Encounter Worldwide volunteer programme. Her responsibilities include language support for the students (who have to work in three languages), library services and pastoral work. The college is currently short-staffed and the current principal is leaving in October, so she has plenty to do. Fortunately Anne is well experienced and has adopted a good pattern of work and relaxation (not always easy when living on a campus).

Anne's flat on the TCL campus is spacious, (if a little damp!), and gives her room to hold her weekly



fellowship group and small group language work. The three Mission Partners and I travelled by road from Colombo to see it and then went on to Kandy to view the spectacle of the 'Perehera', a huge annual festival and procession organised by the Buddhist temples in Kandy, complete with elephants, fire-dancers, bands and relics.

The NCCSL partners' meeting began with a three-day exposure tour to the north of the island. Our

encounters focussed on 'land'. The journey was arranged and led by our NMA, Ralston Weinmann, an expert in inter-faith dialogue, cross-cultural encounter and community development, who has a phenomenal network of contacts, which gave rise to some moving and fascinating conversations. In the Mannar region we visited a Muslim village and sat in the small mosque to hear stories about the eviction by the 'Tamil Tigers' of all Muslims from the North in 1990 and their return 21 years later to find their village destroyed and the land almost reclaimed by forest. While they had rebuilt homes, mosque and school, basic infrastructure is sorely lacking and there were harsh words for regional and national governments.



Many have had a much more difficult experience of returning to their lands and communities. We met a group living under the trees near their village, which is still occupied by the military. One of our more painful encounters was with parents whose children (usually teenagers) had been 'disappeared'. There are hundreds of such cases and the government has failed to get to grips with the issue. A Missing Persons Office has now been set up, though there is much cynicism about its prospects of success.

The two-day Partners' Meeting itself took time to reflect on these encounters and put them in the context of the developing political and social context of the country. NCCSL staff and Partners together then used this to look at the strategy and future work of the Council. The change in leadership will make for a difficult time at NCCSL and we were asked for our prayers as Revd Ebenezer Joseph hands over to a new leadership team.