

Report on a visit to Sri Lanka

October 9-23 2016

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Aims

- To make a first visit to Mission Partners Raing and Mervyn McCullagh
- To spend time with Mission Partner Angleena Keizer
- To meet the President of the Methodist Church Sri Lanka (MCSL)
- To meet with the General Secretary of the National Christian Council (NCCSL) and chair its international partners meeting
- To visit the South Asia Christian Youth Network, NMAs and as many other colleagues as possible

Background

Methodist Church Sri Lanka is one of the oldest partners of Methodist Church Britain, missionaries having landed over 200 years ago. While the thirty years of civil war ended in 2009, its scars are still to be seen, both in the countryside and in the faces of many of its people.

The new government has made great progress in restoring freedom and safety to the public space but is suffering from over-optimistic expectations. A new constitution should be voted on in parliament early next year with a referendum following soon after; we heard widely differing views on this process and the possible outcome.

The economy is in some trouble, while tourism continues to rise and trade with new partners such as China is much in evidence there is a legacy of debt and a decline in traditional earners such as tea. Young people often seek opportunities to leave the country in pursuit of their dreams, either to study for a professional career in the West or to find labouring jobs in the Gulf States.

National Christian Council of Sri Lanka

Now over a hundred years old, the Christian Council is a focus of unity for the Protestant churches in the country. Its members include the Anglican, Methodist, Baptist and Presbyterian traditions as well as the Salvation Army and the Assemblies of God. There are excellent relations with the Catholics and also with Buddhist and Muslim leaders. Ecumenical progress is considerable with recognition of ministries, joint baptism and confirmation services, pulpit sharing and even an ecumenical hymn book.

Activities include major consultations with government on a variety of issues, the production of many hours of radio and TV programming for the national channels, producing joint liturgies, writing and training for children's work, peace building, relief work, counselling training and reconciliation.

The international partners of NCCSL had four days of travel in the central parts of the island, visiting different work being undertaken by the churches acting together through the NCCSL and also being exposed to areas of need which the churches would like to tackle. The floods and landslides which caused such devastation and loss of life earlier this year left many families homeless and a worrying number are still in tents as the monsoon rains begin, the government apparently unable to find a solution and no one else able to fill the gap. The tea plantations created by the British 150 years ago have left a distinctive, restful look to countless miles of hillside but also communities of Tamils, whose antecedents were

brought over from India and who are still treated as second-class citizens not quite part of society, living in poor housing with inadequate access to education and health services. Raing is pictured here listening to some very spirited members of one village we visited; there is no lack of spirit or ideas but a dearth of opportunity.

Those who do have a job in the plantations work very hard. The pickers have to pick 17kg of leaves each day before they qualify for payment. This woman has done her picking and has now collected firewood in order to cook meals at home.



Possible NCC work in such areas includes empowerment and capacity building that might lead to micro-finance schemes enabling families to buy livestock or sell produce or crafts in the markets, etc.; developing libraries and support for children's schooling; teaching people about their legal entitlements and campaigning for equality with other citizens.

A church initiative which began 30 years ago and has now become an autonomous charity is the Women's Development Centre in Kandy. In recent years it has restricted itself to providing a home for girls who have suffered sexual abuse (usually within the family) and become pregnant, 50 girls live here at the moment and 7 tiny babies, they stay until court cases run their course and some sort of reconciliation or long-term living arrangement can be developed, something that may take months or years. Sashi the charismatic and indefatigable leader brought most of us - perhaps especially the men - to tears, but there was hope in her strategies for giving the girls livelihood skills, developing local support networks, working with teenage boys on gender issues and challenging society in general about men and families. This is a very localised project and there are many girls in Sri Lanka who do not receive this sort of support; gender violence typically increases where there has been a long-running war and NCC wishes to do more to counter it.



After the visiting, the international partners met as the Ecumenical Network for Sri Lanka (ENSL) for two days of discussion about the tasks before NCCSL, its strategy for the next three years, its priorities and ways of working. I have chaired this group for almost four years and I think this was its most creative session so far. We were able to explore issues with the very experienced NCCSL staff members and bring our international experience to bear while looking for ways to be supportive to the work's development, sharing know-how, personnel and/or financial resources. It is fair to say that Mervyn McCullagh's experience in strategic planning was already helpfully evident in the thinking and paperwork.

Mission Partners

Spending time with Mervyn and Raing was my main priority for this visit. They have been in Sri Lanka for four months and have settled in very well. It is never easy, however experienced you are, to uproot yourself and land in a new culture, a new living space and a new job, but they have applied themselves enthusiastically to the task and done it well.

The NCCSL General Secretary had been asking the ENSL for personnel such as Mervyn and Raing for two years and is delighted to receive them as a gift from the Methodist Church in Britain and Ireland. Inevitably this means he has had high expectations for what they can achieve from day one. I had a helpful discussion with him. He is delighted



to have Raing taking a senior role in the programmes section as she is so good at relating to other staff and helping to focus work. Mervyn is proving his worth by using his council of churches experience and assisting organisational development.

Language learning has begun well and we took time to travel a little and reflect on some of the cultural and social issues that will affect their lives and work.

Angleena continues to delight the congregation at Kollupitiya Methodist Church in Colombo. In my conversation with the President, he described the ways in which she has exceeded all expectations, both nurturing and challenging the members. She herself is enjoying being 'in the right place' and using her pastoral, preaching and teaching skills.

Other meetings

I had a variety of other meetings, including two NMAs and the coordinator of the South Asia Christian Youth Network (SACYN), as the current post holder lives in Sri Lanka.

*Steve Pearce
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