

Report on a visit to Papua New Guinea

August 1- 8 2016

Partnership Coordinator Asia/Pacific – Steve Pearce

Aims

- To spend time with Mission Partner, Wandé Ebofin, in her new placement in Niu Ailan
- To meet with leaders of the Partner Church, United Church of Papua New Guinea (UCPNG)

Background

Papua New Guinea is the largest country in the Pacific, is a regional hub, has a majority Christian population and contains the least safe cities in the region. It is currently developing huge natural resources of natural gas and UCPNG is concerned to support development but ensure that local communities benefit as well as the transnational companies and the super-rich.

UCPNG is one of the few historic denominations in the region with a growing membership.

The visit

I spent time in Port Moresby with the Moderator and the Treasurer hearing news and views on current priorities as well as being updated on the United Church College of Higher Education, a project identified as a priority by UCPNG and which MCB has therefore supported through the Annual Grants and NMA programmes for some years. It is a large undertaking with some way to go, though the School of Rural Health Sciences has recently succeeded in attracting government funding for new dormitory and teaching accommodation.

The SALT programme was the subject of some discussion. PhD support is the most pressing need for growing theological colleges such as Rarongo. Visiting lecturers to cover study leave and fill in while capacity is built was a further request. *(I was able to discuss this further with CWM, see below.)*

A meeting with the UCPNG Development Unit was very informative and included a discussion on the problems of values in the currently increasingly prevalent 'development-model' approach, where spiritual priorities and Christian ethics are not valued. However, the PNG government does see the churches as vital to delivering its health and education agendas and channels financial support.

New policies on fraud and gender violence have been written and a climate change policy is in progress.

A further meeting was with Sir Samson Lowa, the previous moderator of UCPNG and a good friend of our partnership. He is now senior pastor of one of the capital's churches.

Wandé

UCPNG has 11 regions and Wandé has progressed from New Britain region to New Ireland, a beautiful, relatively unspoilt, large island further to the northwest. The church region, which includes a few smaller islands too, has 34 circuits each having one minister, there are 305 congregations, each having a lay pastor who has been prepared by doing a three year course at the region's Bible School. The membership of New Ireland Province is 160,000 and exactly half of them are members of the United Church.



Between them the churches have about 60% of the schools here. The United Church has 120 primary schools and 200 kindergartens. Wande is teaching at the only UCPNG secondary school, Mangai. She is pictured above with the Principal, Mr Antonio, and they clearly get on well already. I visited the school in time for Friday



devotions and was invited to address all 600+ students. Wande teaches Maths and some ITC Monday to Wednesday and her contribution is clearly appreciated.

Her house is located on the church regional headquarters compound just next to the church petrol station (a successful income generation venture) and about 200m from the sea (not as close as she would have liked!). On the

picture hers is the ground floor of the blue house on the left, the Health Secretary, Agnes, lives above her.

MCB has given a small grant to make a few improvements, which are nearly finished and Wande is quite content here. It is a 20 minute drive to the school, but only a two minute walk to the regional office and her other responsibilities. Wande's blog continues to entertain and inform www.pngtips2.wordpress.com



A meeting with the Bishop and some of the regional staff took place the next day. It was good to hear what an enterprising region it has become under the leadership of Bishop Silot. The difficulty, as one so often hears, is finding the initial investment for income generating projects, but the petrol station was started and improved with no external funding. The accommodation which the region is having to build at its own expense in order to host the 2016 General Assembly of UCPNG will, it is hoped, become a profitable conference venue. As a carpenter, the Bishop (pictured) is proving an asset in more ways than one.



I was delighted to be asked to preach in Wande's local church, Ligga, on Sunday morning.

Singapore was on my route home and I was pleased to be able to meet with colleagues from the Council for World Mission (CWM) and one of the MCB SALT students. Sudipta Singh is Mission Secretary for Research and Capacity Development at CWM and I was able to discuss several

potential areas for cooperation in South Asia and the Pacific with him and it was helpful to pool our impressions and strategies for certain partners that we have in common.

Sanjana Das is studying for a PhD looking at trafficking in South Asia and in particular at the cultural factors that influence or inhibit reintegration into communities of women and girls who have been trafficked. Her results will hopefully help churches and other organization to be more successful in attempts to assist trafficked young women.