

Report on a visit to Sri Lanka

6-11 January 2016

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Aims

- To make a first visit to Mission Partner, Angleena Keizer
- To meet with the newly inducted President of the Methodist Church Sri Lanka (MCSL)
- To make arrangements for a new Mission Partner placement at the National Christian Council (NCCSL)
- To hear reports from Nationals in Mission Appointments (NMAs)

Background

While I was in Colombo the State President Maithripata Sirisena celebrated his first anniversary of taking office. He and the new parliament, which also began last year, have taken great steps to put a stop to the corruption, nepotism, extra-judicial violence, intimidation of the press and communal tension which were the hallmark of the previous regime. This means religious leaders and church workers are no longer risking their personal safety by engaging in inter-faith and reconciliation work and this is a time of real opportunity of which both MCSL and NCCSL are keen to take advantage. Of course, the pressure is already on the new government to deliver change, and the dark forces are still waiting in the wings for their chance to return.

Tourism is very much on the increase (up 20% last year) and the economy is reviving. Remittances from Sri Lankans working abroad (the majority in Gulf States) and sending money home to their families continues to be an enormous contribution to the economy. Following the government's efforts to improve human rights laws in the country foreign governments are re-invigorating their relationships with Sri Lanka, leaders of Pakistan, Indonesia, India, China and Britain have visited recently.

Angleena

It was good to see Angleena looking so happy and to hear enthusiastic stories from her pastoral ministry at Kollupitiya Church. She is leading worship, preaching and working with the congregation to develop various aspects of its ministry in the community. Her gifts are clearly being exercised and appreciated. The new President said he and the congregation are '100% pleased'.

Mission Partners always have to be flexible and in this case one of the demanding areas has been accommodation. Due to the vagaries of the city's planning department, Angleena has moved from an initial temporary apartment into the President's house, which is not as grand as it sounds since it is due to be demolished later in the year, when she will finally be able to move into the minister's manse as it will be vacated by the new president who then finally move into the new President's apartment. It is the latter apartment which is holding everything up; it should have been finished by now but in fact the municipal council has not yet given permission for work to begin, when it does it will take six months to complete. Angleena is however settled in the house, as is the new puppy.

Angleena's mum is visiting at the moment and the two of them will be taking a little time to explore the island; it will be good for Angleena to take a little time away after a very busy first few months.

Kollupitiya Church is a historic place; built in 1854, it is where the autonomous Ceylon Methodist Conference was constituted in 1964 and its site contains the Church headquarters and Methodist College as well as a block of shops and offices which provides rental income for the Church. The congregation is large, mixed and has many gifted and devoted members sustaining a wide variety of ministries and activities. As well as Angleena to lead the English language service there are two other ministers to lead the Tamil and Sinhala services. There is

a monthly Urdu service which Angleena has encouraged in response to the growing presence of people from Pakistan who are seeking refuge and asylum in Sri Lanka.

National Christian Council

Methodist Church Britain has developed an increasingly creative partnership with the Council through the war years and the post-conflict period, focusing efforts on supporting peace building and reconciliation. I have chaired the overseas partners' group for the last three years, during which time an extensive plan of work has been developed. It has been clear for some time that one limiting factor on the work is the need for increased capacity within the organisation to enable it to communicate, report and negotiate through its partnerships both within and beyond Sri Lanka. When Mervyn and Raing MuCullagh were accepted as Mission Partners in late 2015 it soon became clear that they were a very good fit for this work.

The General Secretary and I spent some time looking at the practicalities and the job descriptions for Mervyn and Raing. Both have been enthusiastically accepted by the Executive Committee of NCC and will work as 'consultants' working on capacity building, reporting to the General Secretary. Raing has expertise in conflict transformation, human resources and environmental work and will focus on programmes. Mervyn has experience in ecumenical structures, strategy and partnerships and he will work on planning and international liaison. Their service will hopefully begin in June.

New President

Revd Asiri Perera was inducted at the Conference in August and is beginning to share his vision and priorities. He gave a considerable amount of time to my visit and I was deeply appreciative of the opportunity to converse in some depth about future directions in the Church. It is also a challenging time for the nation and there are opportunities in public life that should not be missed; Revd Asiri has made it clear that he is even prepared to call himself 'Bishop' when it enables greater participation in public life. The Church is committed to continuing its inter faith work, I am an admirer of what has been done in this respect by MCSL and by Lakshman Rosa whose admirable work has been funded by an NMA grant for the last five years. He appears on our DVD about Sri Lanka and I was pleased also to spend time with him on this visit.

I also met two NMAs, Puvana and Shanika, who share the work of the Prayer and Counselling desk, one working in Tamil and one working in Sinhala. They lead the prayer life at headquarters, respond to prayer requests and attempt to resource and encourage prayer in the districts. It was an inspiring conversation. They lead devotions at the beginning of the working day and at noon for five minutes staff members are invited to walk over to their desk and stand around while concerns of the day or of the world outside are prayed for. They also publish a prayer calendar, a thousand copies are circulated around the Connexion (MCSL has 13,000 members), and endeavour to ensure that they run an annual prayer seminar for each of the 47 circuits (some are grouped together!).