

THE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE CUTTACK DIOCESE, CNI, AND THE PLYMOUTH & EXETER DISTRICT OF THE METHODIST CHURCH

A VISIT TO ORISSA - JANUARY 2018

One of the most well-known statements from the Edinburgh Conference of 1910 came from Bishop Azariah of India, one of the 30 or so delegates from the then developing world, who said to the 1100-strong audience of missionaries and church leaders: 'You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. Now we ask you for love. Give us friends'.

You will know that this District has been involved for some time in developing the fledgling partnership between the Plymouth and Exeter District and the Diocese of Cuttack, Church of North India. Cuttack is located in the state of Orissa.

The Synod of May 2017 agreed four proposals on which this partnership would be based, and the foundations of **learning, mutual support and prayer** which would be our shared commitment. In practical terms this could mean pastor-to-pastor or church-to-church prayer partnerships, the linking of our 5 Methodist Schools to the 5 English-medium 'Stewart Schools' in the Diocese, and visits to and from the Diocese by groups who want to learn about and work with one another.

In other words, we are committed to getting to know one another as friends. And in order to see what that could mean in terms of a future visit by a group from this District, a team comprising Rev Graham Thompson, Mr David Clitheroe, Rev Alison Richardson, and me, travelled to the Diocese of Cuttack in January to meet with the Bishop and Diocesan Officers to explore possibilities.



Ready for Sunday worship at Pentakota Telegu Church

We would like to express our heartfelt thanks to Bishop SK Nanda for the interesting and stimulating programme he devised for us, and the generous amount of time he spent with us and the care he extended to us throughout our visit.

Our hosts for most of our visit were Rev Surendra Mohanty and his wife 'Bulbul', who are the Directors of the charity 'Christian Organisation for Development and Education'. They live in the busy town of Puri, and over the last year they have been adapting their buildings into a Retreat Centre with accommodation. They also run a free English medium Nursery School for 50 or so children from the very poorest families of the town.

As well as spending time with the local churches and the nursery children, and sharing the wisdom of our hosts, Graham, David and I had a four day journey with Bishop Nanda into

the southern and inland regions of the Diocese, bringing messages of Gospel and greeting to village communities and churches, visiting schools, colleges, medical facilities, and meeting with the Diocesan Staff.

I wish I had more space to tell you about the hospitality of the villagers of Padripalli, who welcomed us as only Tribal villagers can - with lively dancing, singing, drumming, smiling, whooping, garlanding, hand washing, foot-touching, and showering us with petals! The villagers crammed into the little church, set at the top of a flight of steps onto which had been laid colourful saris for us to walk on. They danced to their Christian songs, the girls gracefully, the boys energetically, and afterwards served us tea and fruit outside, while the few who knew English spoke with us, and interpreted for their friends who didn't.

Greeted by the people at the hillside village of Padripalli



I wish I could articulate the heartbreak of the devastating poverty we saw - no amount of reading or watching news reports prepares you for the sights, sounds and smells that assail your senses when you are present and involved. The villages we visited are far from the tourist trail, places where westerners are seldom seen. Poverty is entrenched and perpetuated in India through the caste system in a very particular way. Caste condemns individuals from birth to a life of exploitation, violence, social exclusion and segregation. Women are particularly oppressed. Caste discrimination not only violates human rights, but also exposes those affected by it to other abuses of their civil, political, economic, social, religious and cultural rights.

Approximately 80% of the population of Cuttack Diocese is made up of Dalit (non-caste) and Tribal peoples; CNI and its Dioceses are committed to serving the poor and excluded in their communities, and do this in many imaginative ways through partnerships with other bodies, and through their SBSS programmes.

The Health Clinic & Ambulance at Dengaambo



We met wonderful people like Dr Nanda, Director of the Christian Hospital at Berhampur, whose gentle compassion and dedication shone through everything he told us about his work among some of the most needy. This hospital also supports a Health Clinic with its own ambulance in the Tribal village of Dengaambo, and we were able to visit, and hear about some of the improvements to the health and hygiene of the communities

through the work of the two resident nurses.

There were moments of humour...as we were introduced to the (very young) students at the Theological College in Gopalpur, with the words 'These are special visitors - you see their age - and yet they have travelled all the way from England to see us!' I suppose compared to them, we did seem to be old!

I'd like to tell you about the wonderful morning playing parachute games and dancing with the nursery children - who recite the Lord's Prayer in English every morning, led by one of their 4 year old classmates, Divja.

There was the evening when Graham and I became separated from the others, and we were taken at breakneck speeds through the narrow back streets of Puri, by a 'tuk-tuk' driver who had no English, and absolutely no idea of the way. He expected to be paid handsomely for getting lost, while we wondered if we would ever see home again! Graham's impression of a train eventually saved the day (our hosts live close to the train station)!



There were so many moments of joy - the renewing of friendships with people Alison and I had met on previous visits; the evening spent at Bishop Nanda's home in Cuttack, where numerous members of his extended family seemed to live too; the sharing in vibrant worship with the people of Pentakota and their humble pastor - people who have almost nothing materially, but who exhibit a deep prayerful dependency on the God who provides.

There was closer understanding as we met with the Diocesan Officers, and they responded, tentatively at first, then with the imagination of possibility to the suggestions that Rev Graham and Bishop Nanda had brought to them about partnership. Of course, these links will need nurturing, and time to develop, but there is a willingness to be open to one another and to work towards a closer relationship.



One of the great gifts of our visit was sharing the home of Rev Mohanty and his wife. Their home and Retreat Centre is an oasis of welcome and hospitality, peace and beauty, and the time we spent talking with them was so precious. The sense of the presence of God was everywhere, and we returned at the end of our visit so richly blessed. The picture shows Rev Surendra Mohanty and his wife Charushree outside Naomi Building.

I wish I could say more, but nothing really says enough; as the expression goes, 'you had to be there'. And that was the whole point of the visit - to prepare the way for others to go and stay and live alongside and share some of the rich experiences and blessings that we have experienced. Perhaps **you** would like to be part of the next visit?

Bishop Azariah, all those years ago, asked for the love of friends. As our visit was drawing to a close, David was in conversation with Rev Mohanty, as we tried to understand all that we had experienced, and David asked him, 'Mohanty, tell me why we are here'. Mohanty replied 'You are here because you love us!'

Deborah Kirk