

Article for Church Magazine News from Sri Lanka

We have just returned from the annual Methodist Conference, which took place in Batticaloa in the east of the country (20th – 25th August). It was our fourth conference but our first outside the capital Colombo. Even Colombo could not match the wonder of an air-conditioned church hall whose brand new AC units performed brilliantly. The town was pleased to erect large banners on roundabouts to welcome the ministers, evangelists and lay representatives from around the island that attended. Not many national bodies would be interested in having their annual conference in Batticaloa!

Despite Government claims that the East has been “cleared” of the LTTE (Tamil Tigers), there is a huge army presence at frequent checkpoints, on street corners and in camps in the rural areas. Is it an army of occupation or, as the Government would see it, liberation? As foreigners, we are not hassled very much, but it nevertheless feels very oppressive. The locals appear patient and stoical but cannot possibly like it. During the public event on Friday afternoon, the recently “elected” leader of the Eastern Province, Mr. Pillayan, joined the audience. This meant that the church compound, in which some police were already positioned, suddenly became the home of a dozen gun-toting soldiers who spent their time casting their beady eyes over the crowd. One swaggered up and down the central aisle for the rest of the afternoon. So, a gentle dance for peace by young girls carefully carrying candles and wearing beautiful white sarees seemed like a perfect counterpoint.

Of course, the conference was an excellent opportunity to meet people and hear stories from around the country. We met a new British Methodist lay Mission Partner, David Furnival, who is stationed in the east in Muttur where our friend Rev'd Sujithar (Rosemary is godmother to his daughter, now aged 18 months) is the minister. We look forward to seeing more of David. Conference heard from two ministers in the northern town, Kilinochi. This is the headquarters of the LTTE and the battlefield is slowly but steadily contracting around it, as the Sri Lankan Army closes in. There are 200,000 newly displaced people and the two Methodist ministers and their families are amongst them. Three congregations have removed the roofs from their churches to reduce the effect of bomb or shell damage. They said that the air force is dropping 1000lb bombs. The effects on children of the insecurity and fear are horrible to contemplate. Petrol now costs 900 rupees (£4.50) a litre.

A Methodist human rights lawyer persuaded the conference to produce a resolution condemning the increasing control exercised by the army throughout the country, often ignoring the law.

Methodist Relief and Development Services reported that, using money from abroad, the Methodist Church completed nearly 900 tsunami houses last year. Several thousand houses have already been built. A number of vocational training centres have also been built and equipped and are in use. The emphasis now is on livelihoods. Concerns were expressed about those Methodists living in poor housing unaffected by the tsunami but who saw non-Methodists housed in very good new houses. The President was able to deal with this enquiry using technical arguments (donor conditions) rather than having to resort to theology – much the better thing to do in the circumstances.

Conference also debated youth representation at all levels of the Church and voted in favour of generous quotas, e.g. 40% of lay representatives at Quarterly Meetings (Circuit Meetings in Britain) should be young people (18-30). This debate was quite interesting. Last year there was a similar debate about women's representation. The older men of the Conference were sounding a bit threatened!

James Rowley, Mission Partner in Sri Lanka
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The Theological College of Lanka
Nandana Uyana
Pilimalawa 20450
Sri Lanka