

Health Warning

Most of this paper concerns a remote rural area a long way from "121" and covers only the last eight months of the Church of Scotland Mission there.

Before going to India

My understanding of the thinking undergirding the Church of Scotland's world mission enterprise was that churches in the West had taken the Gospel to many parts of the world, but that, in those lands where an indigenous church had taken root, that church now had the prime responsibility for spreading the Gospel among its own people – though there was still a place for fraternal involvement by the churches in the West which had previously been classed as "sending churches". The era of "Mother Church" and "Daughter Church" was over.

In my interview for service overseas I was told that C/S missionaries in India were no longer "in charge".

This was the theory. Once in India I was to find out that, whatever might be the case in Calcutta or Bombay, in the E Himalayas things went on much as before. Perhaps the Bodo people in the E Duars thought this new young man would one day replace Rev George McLaren, their missionary-in-charge, without realising that there wouldn't be much left either in Church or Mission to be "in charge" of !

The situation on the ground in E Himalaya on my arrival in Feb 1954

Church : The Eastern Himalaya Church Council of the United Church of Northern India (a union of North Indian Presbyterians and Congregationalists formed in 1924 – not to be confused with the present CNI, formed in 1970) operated like the presbytery it had been before union thirty years earlier. Locally, Kirk Sessions retained their old name and modus operandi.

Mission : The Eastern Himalaya Mission Council, consisting of all the missionaries in the area and a number of senior India colleagues, was responsible for non-ecclesiastical matters (schools and a hospital). It had only eight more months of life left in it.

The Eastern Duars Regional Board, set up three years previously as the first instalment of integration of Church and Mission, was accountable to the Mission Council for non-ecclesiastical affairs locally. I imagine it was meant to replace the

"missionary-in-charge" of the E Duars.

In October 1954 the Mission Council was replaced by an Eastern Himalaya Church Board, made up overwhelmingly of Indian members, with only eight missionaries. As a "new boy" I was not one of the eight.

My missionary apprenticeship in the Eastern Duars

I was very fortunate to have Rev George McLaren as my senior missionary. He was Head Master of the Mahakalguri Mission High School. Soon after my arrival he handed over the headship to a Bengali Christian, who was later succeeded by a well-qualified local Bodo Christian young man. As I had no teaching qualifications there was no question of my future being in the High School.

There were 20 scattered rural congregations, some quite large, with a membership almost entirely drawn from the Bodo tribe. Each had its own catechist but all were under the one Kirk Session with Rev Jitnal Narjinary as the minister-in-charge. He had an assistant minister.

There was a central fund into which all the congregations' Sunday offerings went and from which the catechists' and ministers' salaries were paid. As missionary-in-charge George McLaren had operated this fund for years. Once the the E Duars Regional Board had come into being he carried on as before, but wearing the new hat of Treasurer of the Regional Board. This was, no doubt, a significant change, but I doubt if most of the local folk noticed any difference. They continued to speak of the "Scottish Mission". One of my first jobs was to help George with the book keeping.

Most Sundays we sat with the elders in church in Mahakalguri while the Pastor Saheb (as Rev Jitnal Narjinary was known) conducted the service. Occasionally George would take me out to church in one or other of the nearer villages, where he would conduct communion and all the baptisms that had accumulated since the previous visit of the Pastor Saheb.

As well learning Bengali and helping George in various ways I took a youth Bible Class on Sundays by translation.

Western Duars

After a year learning Bengali I was put "in charge" of the Western Duars, a Hindi speaking area where the only ordained Indian minister had recently died! I was chaplain to the tea planters and missionary to tea garden labourers. This "temporary" posting lasted over two years.

Back to Eastern Duars and the Bodos

On George McLaren's retiral in 1958 I was put "in charge" of the Eastern Duars and was joined by Lesley (ex-BMS). We had been married in Calcutta, having met at Bengali Language School. I took over from George as High School Secretary and as Treasurer of the E Duars Regional Board.

After a bit we asked the Pastor Saheb for permission to go and live in other Christian villages for a couple of months at a time. He declined to let us do this, saying that our health would suffer. We had one daughter then. After the birth of our second daughter we asked him again. This time he agreed and arranged the first of a series of stays in villages.

We did lay training with catechists, elders, women's leaders, youth, Sunday School teachers. We sold Christian literature in churches and bazaars and ran an annual youth camp. Somewhere along the line I transferred my ministry from C/S to UCNI.

In 1970 Lesley and I were invited to take up a joint appointment as Stewardship Directors in the Church of North India, a union of six denominations to be formed in November of that year.

Church of North India

We were transferred to Nagpur in Central India, a good place from which to travel to CNI dioceses all over North India promoting stewardship for the next eight years.

We were accountable to the CNI through its Synod's Stewardship Committee. They supplied our work budget, while the Church of Scotland provided our living allowance.

One spin off of the stewardship work we did was to foster a sense of belonging to the CNI among local churches. At the end of two months in the Diocese of Orissa, where most of the congregations had previously been Baptist, we were told "now we really feel we belong to the Church of North India".

By 1979, when we left India, we had trained our Indian successor, Rev Bella Bagh.

Twinning

About 20 years after we left India we were involved in the setting up of a twinning between the Presbytery of Lothian and the Diocese of Eastern Himalaya. I was Twinning Coordinator at this end. Under my successor, Hugh Trevor, there are now ten congregations in Presbytery linked with congregations in the Diocese.