

## **Visit by members of Derby Diocese to the Church of North India March 2007**

On March 3<sup>rd</sup>, seventeen members of Derby Diocese began a visit to three dioceses of the Church of North India: Eastern Himalaya, Phulbani, and North East India. The aim was to develop links between churches and schools in Derbyshire and India which had been established in recent years, and to initiate new ones.

At the beginning of the visit, the group spent a few days in the Himalayan hill station of Kalimpong with eight members of the Ashbourne churches, who had been doing voluntary work in schools in the diocese of Patna. We were guests at a service in Kalimpong church to celebrate the first anniversary of the consecration of the Bishop of Eastern Himalaya, the Rt. Revd. Naresh Ambala. The church in Kalimpong was originally founded by Scottish Missionaries, and the Scottish influence remains very strong, including the bagpipers who led us into a dazzling display of Nepali dances given by children from the local CNI schools.

One sub-group remained in the Diocese of Eastern Himalaya for virtually the whole visit. This diocese has a range of programmes designed to help those on low incomes, in particular helping them to become self-reliant in agriculture. HIV/AIDS is a growing problem, and the diocese works with local health care services to teach people how to avoid infection. In this area of India the trafficking of children into bonded labour is increasing, with criminal groups taking advantage of the vulnerability created by rural poverty, and the diocese has started an initiative to counter this.

Another group travelled east to the diocese of North East India, and visited the states of Meghalaya and Assam. For some years this diocese has had a link with the church at Crich and the Alfreton group of churches. The cathedral at Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, was founded by the British in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and is constructed according to the traditional Assamese bamboo and plaster style. In some areas of the diocese a charismatic revival appears to be growing in strength, although its effects are controversial. There is a strong desire in some areas to give children's ministry a more prominent role. Very different from the urban churches of Shillong and Jowai were the rural churches in Assamese villages such as Bengbari and Solabari, near the border with Bhutan. Founded by British missionaries over a hundred years ago, the church buildings here are mostly very simple. One church at Sekhar, however, had recently been refurbished and was clearly thriving, with energetic worship and a deep commitment to mission.

Three members of the group visiting this diocese, Alison Brown from the Diocesan Board of Education, Rosemary Wibberley from St. Werburgh's school, Spondon, and Nicola Wright from Doveholes school, near Buxton, had come with the specific aim of creating a resource pack on India for Derbyshire schools, and making links between individual schools in India and in Derbyshire. Several such links are now being established.

Alistair Langton, the Youth Adviser for Derby Diocese, met with people involved in youth ministry in the diocese of NE India, with the hope of arranging a youth exchange sometime in the next two years or so.

The third group visited the diocese of Phulbani, in the state of Orissa. This diocese is

one of the poorest in the Church of North India, and largely rural. Members of the group were guests at several church conventions, which drew together large crowds for teaching and worship. They were told that their presence had contributed to a new revival in the diocese!

The group will now consider ways of following up the visit, perhaps by developing new links with individual churches. One aspect may be support for some of the social projects and educational needs of the three dioceses, but the partnership should not be primarily financial in nature. It is clear that, whatever form the evolution of the partnership takes, the visit made a big impression not just on those who were fortunate enough to take part, but on many of those we met. We were told in one church that since the withdrawal of the European missionaries after the Second World War, the Christians there had felt orphaned. Our re-establishing of the connection, but not as parents but as partners, was clearly very important to them.

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