

Starting on a journey

Walking alongside our Christian sisters and brothers, and indeed alongside all Dalits in their struggle for justice, is a key way in which we can show support and solidarity with them.

As incoming MWiB President from July 2013, I was privileged to go on a 3-week visit to the Church of North India (CNI) in February 2013. The visit had a number of objectives, for MWiB, for the wider church here and in India, and for me personally:

- To further the work already being done by MWiB, by experiencing and understanding more of CNI's work with Dalits, especially women and girls.
- To visit and learn about the new CNI model of community hostels that give Dalit children access to education.
- To discover the priorities of the Church of North India, particularly in their women's work, with a view to developing relationships if possible.

I learnt at first-hand that

- Dalits make up 85-90% of the membership of CNI, so any programme for CNI members and their families, in the areas I visited, is for Dalits.
- Dalit Christians (and Muslims) face double discrimination as schemes to reserve a quota of places for Dalits in higher education and in employment, recognising their disadvantaged position in society, are only available to Dalits of the Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh faiths. Campaigning to change this law is a key part of CNI's work for social justice for its members, and one on which they are putting increasing emphasis.
- The vast majority of Dalits still live in extreme poverty and experience severe discrimination in all aspects of life, despite the recent development of cities, the growth of the Indian economy, the emergence of a metropolitan middle-class, all of which only benefit up to 20% of India's 1.2 billion people.
- For Dalit women and girls, with lower participation in education and employment, with fewer rights in society and with lower literacy rates than their male counterparts, the position is even bleaker, without targeted intervention and support.
- Girls are not valued equally with boys in many parts of Indian society, with abortion of female foetuses and the killing of baby girls being not uncommon.
- Parts of Indian society too are not respectful of girls and women, with sexual harassment and assaults being commonly found.

As MWiB explores a major partnership with the Church in North India (see 5.5-5.6), CNI has chosen to focus that support initially in the Marathwada Diocese. This is part of the state of Maharashtra, which stretches from Mumbai to Nagpur. The Diocese has 2 main cities Aurangabad and Jalna. Despite being poor and having little experience of partnership working, the Diocese is making bold plans to build and manage a hostel in each of the two cities. These will be for Dalit girls to help them access education which is not available in their home locations.

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