

COLLOQUIUM on WEAVING SHANTI (PEACE)

On the Occasion of the 60th Anniversary Celebration of the Fellowship of the Least Coin Movement.
Kerala, November 2016.

On the 31st October the participants in the Colloquium arrived from all directions at a small but adequate holiday villa rented from a member of the Mar Thoma Church. There was a misty view of the Indian Ocean, Kerala has two sessions of monsoon, and there were coconut palms all around. The beach was close by but rip tides make swimming a dangerous activity. This was Kovalam, a fishing village and tourist resort south of Trivandrum, well placed for our meetings in the city and for eating out at the local beachside restaurant.

In all we had 16 participants though we would be joining with many more in Trivandrum. Staying at the villa with the 4 of us from overseas were the management committee of the All India Council of Christian Women. Dr Saramma Varghese, President, from the Mar Thoma Church and a retired college principal from Kerala. Mrs Aleyamma (Leena) Thomas, Vice President, Mar Thoma Church and the World Council of Churches also from Kerala. Ms Susamma George Mathew, Mar Thoma Church, our host in Trivandrum with Mrs Litti Jose. Mrs Basanti Biswas, Methodist Church, Principal of the Calcutta Girls High School. Revd Dr Syamala Sukumar, Baptist Church, President of the Association of Theologically Educated Women from Andhra Pradesh. Revd Eben Jason, Church of South India, campaigner against female infanticide from Tamil Nadu with her husband Revd Jason. Mrs Mavis Russell, Church of North India and the Fellowship of the Least Coin from Delhi. Captain Alice Jose, Salvation Army and manager of projects in Trivandrum. Ms Moumita Biswas, Executive Secretary AICCW, CNI, with her young daughter Arusha, from Kolkata at Kovalama but currently in Nagpur. Plus Ms Hungreiphy (Ahung) Zimick, intern with AICCW from the Baptist Church, Manipur and Ms Pratiksha, volunteer with AICCW from the Methodist Church and Sunday School Superintendent in Nagpur. From Brazil we had Dilce Regina Paiva de Oliveira a priest in the Diocese of Pelotas, Miriam Weibye from Action of Churches Together in Scotland and the WCC, Robert Nellist the Protection of Vulnerable Groups Coordinator for the Diocese of St Andrews and a member of the Provincial PVG Committee. Then me, Val Nellist, from the Global Partnerships Committee of the SEC.

After rest and time for settling in we began the programme. There was prayer and reflection at the beach and then we went by bus to a refuge for the children of sex workers that had been set up on the edge of Trivandrum. The refuge is named Chilla which means a roosting place and the logo for the organization is a line drawing of chicks in a treetop nest. Here children are given a home and support to engage in education whilst remaining in contact with their mothers.



Chilla is a secular organization with some paid staff backed by volunteers, mostly university students. The manager is a former activist with the Kerala communist party but now disillusioned by the failure of the party to fulfil its promises. He shared with us the failure of the churches too in dealing humanely with the kind of children Chilla works with. Churches provide hostels for children but if they are the children of sex workers then they must become as orphans. Their mothers must cut off all links because the churches fear for the moral health and safety of the children. This results in the sex workers refusing to seek help for their children in these institutions and the children are then drawn into the sex trade. At Chilla mothers are encouraged to come and go as they wish. They do wish to have their children educated and take the opportunity to break out of poverty and degradation.

We also discussed the plight of transgendered children and young people in India. Chilla seeks to expand work with this group who are also at risk of being drawn into the sex trade because they face rejection in society. It was enlightening for all of us but I think those of us visiting from outside India were both surprised and encouraged to hear these difficult things openly and sympathetically talked about. Some of these church women were theologically conservative but their Christian concern and practical humanity was evident in their acceptance that Chilla had things to say that the Church must hear and act upon. It was also interesting that it was the young intern who had identified Chilla as something we should look at. Ahung is a Naga. Nagas are one of the many tribal groups who fall below the caste system and suffer oppression, abuse and

expropriation of land. The Naga people, like many in the north east of India, are predominantly Christian.



Meditative Walk at Kovalam

After this visit we were welcomed to a Mar Thoma Church in Trivandrum. We participated in a short service of prayer and worship and then enjoyed a generous supper. Jerusalem Church is well maintained and clearly well supported. The building has a spacious hall area with catering and toilet facilities, air conditioning and an effective sound system. The congregation has a variety of outreach community programmes and though the Mar Thoma Church doesn't ordain women, women are much in evidence leading the outreach work.

The 2nd November saw us back in Trivandrum as guests at the Immanuel Mar Thoma Church for the Colloquium. It was set in the context of worship leading into the telling of the story of Shanti Solomon and her vision for a worldwide movement of women who would pray for peace and justice. A movement that would take its inspiration from the gospel text where Jesus noticed the poor widow who put her small brass coin into the temple treasury out of her love for God, the least coin, all that she had.

The Colloquium was a sharing of aspects of care for justice and support for the vulnerable. From India there was work to combat female infanticide in Tamil Nadu, care for HIV positive folk in Andhra Pradesh with

related community education, family income generation through cooperatives in Trivandrum, the international Thursdays in Black campaign actively promoted by the AICCW, and from Delhi news of the Fellowship of the Least Coin. The guests from Scotland and Brazil talked about safeguarding for vulnerable groups, the collaboration between Christian Aid and the Episcopal Churches in Brazil and Scotland to produce the 'Loving one another' Bible study toolkit, and the international Side by Side movement of women and men seeking gender justice. Later that day we visited the Salvation Army's centre to meet the women's cooperative and see the goods they produce.

3rd November we wore our Thursdays in Black badges. We travelled north for three hours to the Mar Thoma meditation centre on the island of Perungalam near Kollam. The distance was not great but the main north south road through Kerala is both narrow, busy and almost urban. The meditation centre has its own antique wooden motor launch piloted by the priest who took us out to the island across a lagoon surrounded by coconut palms. It fell to us Scots to conduct morning worship in a celtic style, we were lacking resources but

with the help of the internet we coped. Our efforts were enhanced by the use a traditional fishing boat brought on land and converted to form a worship space. We spent the afternoon engaging with Moumita in the forms of counselling used with those who are recovering from abuse. Then back to Trivandrum for a dinner hosted by the Vice Chancellor of the Kerala Technical University. Sign of the growing prosperity of Kerala and of parts of India generally.

On our final morning the AICCW committee met to plan for the future. The organisation is in resurgence led by a small, determined and resourceful group of women. Moumita is well supported and with great energy she is taking them into engagement with and practical action for the kingdom of God. Our presence as companions and partners in mission helped and we learned much from the interaction.



At Jerusalem Mar Thoma Church in Trivandrum with hosts.



Most of the group at the Mar Thoma Retreat Centre, Perungalam