

MANIPUR MISSION AUG 11-20, 2013: TEACHING, PREACHING, RELATING, ENCOURAGING, REFLECTING, AND REJOICING IN THE LORD! (Gary Choong)

This brief report is written in a narrative style to draw the reader to feel with the movements of God's work of grace when I was there. I am sorry that I have no pictures to show you. I did not bring a camera or my cell phone with me. Prior to Sunday (Aug 11), my wife, May, and I had spent some meaningful good moments together: long walks/jogs around a reservoir, taking time to converse, sharing a couple meals outside, watching TV together, and just plain spending time at home. To be honest, I almost, always, feel guilty about having to leave for any overseas trip without her by my side. We have always been doing things together for many years until recently in the last few years, when we realized that our work schedules, energy levels, safety concerns in the place of travel, and other matters in Singapore that need daily attention too.

"Peter, my brother, thank you for your limousine-taxi service, and a splendid dinner thrown in as well. I have been blessed by your servant-ministry." My flight from Singapore (Aug 11, 9pm) to Kolkata was four hours, arriving in Kolkata past midnight (Aug 12). I was arranged to stay over at a motel close to the airport for my 11am flight next day to Imphal (capital of Manipur). I was met at the airport by our brother Rev. Mathotmi (whom most of you have met in Singapore), a brief stop at his home for a light snack with his wife, and thereafter, an hour plus drive to Kangpokpi, where Manipur Theological College (MTC) is located. MTC celebrates its 60th Anniversary this December. Started by western missionaries more than a century ago, MTC, shares a very huge piece of land in the mountains with a Mission Hospital and a Mission High School, which serve the communities around the Kangpokpi area. MTC serves students from other Northeast Indian states as well as Myanmar. It was about after 6pm when we arrived at the MTC campus.

The skies were getting dark as I was introduced to the Principal of MTC, Dr. Kholi, and his wife. I will be staying with them in their century-old colonial bungalow built by the missionaries. They showed me to my room with a bed, and a table and chair—spartan and clean. Dinner was ready and I had my first taste of NE Indian food with portable lights shining on the table. Zimik, a faculty member at MTC, who was at CCBC a few weeks ago, joined us for dinner. We had some conversations in the dark after dinner, and then it was time for me to get a hot bath (I was so glad), and then to bed at about 8.30PM (SG, 11PM). Intermittent electricity is available only for about two hours at different times each day.

My day begins at 5.00AM. Waking up to the almost silence of the mountains and surrounding woods is a very good experience for someone from Singapore. I will sit by the bed or walk out from my room to the patio of the century-old colonial bungalow, and relax and take in the fresh air and listen to rain pelting down from the skies above (it rained everyday when I was there, the heaviest being Saturday morning). The grounds are wet and muddy.

Mrs. Kohli will have breakfast (tea, bread, butter, and bananas) ready for me by 6.30AM, by which time I would have showered (hot water from the kitchen using firewood, together with very cold water from the tap!), shaved, and cleaned, and ready to go for the day! Between 8.30am-9.30am, it's lunch! (yes, you heard (read) it right). That's a cultural shock for me! Didn't I just had breakfast at 6.30am? Well, "In Rome (Manipur), do as the (Manipurees) do."

I teach two different cohorts of students from 9.30 AM through 12 noon, by which time, is chapel hour. Then at 1.15pm, I teach a third cohort, the final year students. To the second and third years (18 of them), I teach expository preaching; to the fourth year (12), leadership; and the final year (14), spiritual formation. I preach daily at the chapel as well. Five straight days—four plus hours on my feet, and more! Faculty tea is served after chapel. On Friday, Aug 16, the Manipur Baptist Convention, represented by the MTC board chairperson, General-Secretary, and a few others visited the college to personally thank me for my time and ministry. I was moved by their affirmations. They have extended another invitation for me to teach at the college as well as to their pastors for 2014!

In the afternoons, time is usually spent in conversations with faculty members or anyone who cares to visit and chat just about anything under the sun. These are just so relaxing. Without fail, at about 4.30pm, someone will come by and ask to walk with me to explore the surrounding landscapes and nature around. I enjoy those evening hour walks. I also had an opportunity to visit the hospital with the chaplain on Friday to pray for the patients there! What an experience for me. Some of the faculty and families will take turns to host lunch and dinner during my five-day stay in the MTC campus.

Visiting them in their very humble homes and eating with them give me a depth of appreciation for their lives and a state of thankfulness to God for what I have and enjoy in life. In return for their kind hospitality, I give them boxes of chocolates that my wife bought for me to bring for them. These were shared with families and students. All of your kind SG dollars and Indian Rupees that you've shared with me, and some of my own, I disbursed them appropriately too.

Soon it was all over by Saturday (Aug 17) late afternoon. Zimik offered to drive me down to Imphal. He asked if I would like to try driving in Manipur, and I jumped at the opportunity! He was so amazed at the way I handled his car for the first time, and the speed I had driven too (I was like "Speedy Gonzalez" to him)! Zimik confessed he has little driving experience and slow. We had such a wonderful time laughing, talking, and just relaxing in the car with another colleague. I was met by Mathotmi at a "hotel" in Imphal, where I was to stay for two nights before flying back to Singapore.

Next morning, Sunday, Aug 18, I was picked up at 5.30am, had a quick breakfast at Mathotmi's house, and was driven to a country church, Riha Baptist Church (about 45min. from the city). Their worship service starts at 7am (wouldn't it be nice for CCBC?). Mathotmi translated the sermon given in English. I was asked to preach on "giving" and I chose the passage from Haggai chapter 1. By the grace of God, twelve brothers and sisters came forward when the altar call was given. The pastor, Ringmayo, and his wife are so hospitable, and we had such a marvelous time of conversation and laughter with them and a deacon, as they served lunch for us. From the rooftop of their building, I could see the mountains and landscape surrounding the village. It is so peaceful and scenic to the eye, notwithstanding the hot weather.

Coming back to the Imphal Hotel, Mathotmi discussed his Doctor of Ministry dissertation proposal with me to ask for advice which he hopes to begin writing sometime in 2014. Pray for him as he struggles with when, where, and how much he could be away from family, ministry, in order to write and research on his thesis. Later that evening, Mathotmi and wife hosted me to a splendid dinner at the Classic Hotel as a way of thanking me for the week's ministry among them.

Monday (Aug 19)—I had a couple of brief meetings and discussions with some of the Secretaries (heads of departments) of the Manipur Baptist Convention, and the General-Secretary, Rev. Dr. Konghar. I come to know their respective roles and responsibilities and the challenges that the convention faces in terms of pastors, churches and the MTC in Manipur. By the time I was done with meetings, I was ready to go home immediately!—I missed my wife and home so much.

Going to Manipur from Singapore through Kolkata and back, set me back by two days: one overnight stay in Kolkata when arriving, and at least eight hours of waiting (no free internet for waiting passengers) at the Kolkata airport till midnight to fly home; by then it's Aug 20 (Tue) morning. This trip, the plane (SQ) was delayed in Kolkata for about an hour, and took off about 12.45AM. The delay was however compensated by good Singapore Airlines service. I enjoyed the window seat comfortably, as the next seat was empty for me to stretch a little more. We touched down Changi Airport about 7.45AM, and I rushed home in a taxi after I claimed my baggage. My wife greeted me with a hug (it was so good to be home!) and put my bags down, headed to the bathroom for a (very much needed) shower, a change of new clothes, and rushed down to Baptist Theological Seminary to teach my two classes for the day. I was already late for the 8.30AM class. The students were waiting for me as my wife had earlier called one of them to inform them of my plane's late arrival.

THANK YOU for praying, and supporting me as I embarked on this Manipur Mission trip. It was a trip that I had enjoyed very much. The ministry, the friends, the people, and all that I had experienced are a testimony of God's goodness and grace to me. The Manipur Baptist Convention and the Manipur Theological College are very appreciative of the church's support in terms of your sending me as a representative of God's grace to them. They do not even have a full slice of what we have here in comfortable modern, developed Singapore, but they have a heart for God and what He is doing among them in that part of Northeast India. They are brothers and sisters in need and we have played a part in supplying their need. May God be most honoured as we avail ourselves to be of service to Him:

¹² This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³ Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. ¹⁴ And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (2 Corinthians 9:12-15)