



Report of the Partnership Church Task Force of the Denominational Affairs Committee

First Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashville

Visit to Unitarian Church Pingwait and the
113th Conference of the Unitarian Union of North East India at Jowai
and the closing of the
Quasquicentennial Celebration of the Unitarian Church Jowai
February, 2013

Compiled and written by Jim Seavey
April, 2013

FUUN visitors to Pingwait, NE India

On February 4, 2013, 5 members of FUUN began their journey to North East India to the state of Meghalaya – the land of clouds. We met with Doug Pasto-Crosby in Mumbai, and arrived in Shillong the 6th. We were greeted by Elizabeth Fairs of York, England, representative of the Boland Trust, and visited by Rev. Nongroi Sutang of secretary of the Unitarian Union of North East India. On the morning of the seventh, Doug, The Rev. Gail Seavey, Jim Seavey, Jane Norris, Julian Raschke, and Sasha Reed were accompanied by Wanglang Mylliengap on a hour and a half trip to the village of Pingwait to visit with members of FUUN's Partner Church. Each of us came with various expectations,



from seeing friends from a previous visit, to feeling the warmth of a south India climate (it was seasonably chilly in the North East). In Pingwait we gathered at the church with Mr. Fairstar Bina, secretary of the church and Kong Bria Mynsong, and many from the Mynsong family and other members who could be there on a weekday. We presented gifts from the Herb Fair, the Board, and

ourselves to Mr. Bina on behalf of the Unitarian Church Pingwait and it's members,



and sat in small groups getting to know each other. We listened to a tiny girl sing in Khasi and then 'Bah, Bah, Blacksheep'. We then had more conversation and lunch at the



home of Kong Morilda Mynsong. The food in NEI is simple, no curries and spices, just rice (local and extremely tasty) and fresh vegetables, with a bit of chicken (also local free range and especially delicious). People in the Khasi tribal areas speak one of five dialects and many



have a good grasp of English, though do not have many opportunities to speak with a native speaker. We each made many acquaintances, and Gail and Jim were warmed by the renewed relationship with Kong Bria Mynsong, who had been especially kind on their previous visit. After lunch we paid a brief visit to the Annie Margaret Barr Children's Village, where our path intersected with a group lead by Reverend Darihun Khriam, supervising minister of nine churches, including Pingwait, and Treasurer of the Unitarian Union of North East India. Wanlang showed us the isolated village of Laitum from the cliff edge 2,000 feet above it, and brought us for tea at his aunt's



house in Kharang on our way back to the hotel in Shillong. Wanlang helps church communities form Self Help Groups, an important economic engine for the area. We missed seeing Rev. Player Marboh of Pingwait who was detained by his wife giving birth (a boy, Feb 8).

On February 8 we moved to Jowai for the opening ceremony of the 113th Annual Unitarian Union Conference and the Closing

Celebration of the 125th year of the founding of the Jowai Unitarian Church, the first in North East India.. The raising of the flag

for the occasion with a burst of confetti and song was conducted by Revs. Derrick Pariat and Nongroi Sutang, President and Secretary of the UUNEI. Rev. Sutang, who greeted us in Shillong, is also a teacher at the Annie Margaret Barr High School near the AMBCV and Pingwait. We stayed with various host families, some of whom were also hosting whole villages who had come for the weekend. We are especially



grateful to Rev. Helpme Mohrmen, past UUNEI President and member of the Jowai church, for

the arrangements, and of course our host families, Roosevelt Pariat (Doug), Emmuhot Niangli (Jim and Gail), Florida Perida (Jane and Sasha), and Homeland Lamar



(Julian). On Saturday we were treated, along with the thousands of Unitarians from the villages, Shillong



and Jowai, to tribal drumming and dances of the Karbi tribal group, and of the Jaintia tribal group from Nongtalong and Jowai. We were guests of honor with other dignitaries from the U.S, U.K, Canada and 'mainland' India, sharing the platform and introducing ourselves to the audience during one of the many religious services. Some of us used this time to witness traditional archery along

the river far below the city at the monument to the Jaintia king who resisted the British. We have just begun to learn of the subtle differences between the Karbi of Pingwait and the Jaintia of Jowai, but Wanlang presented us with a framed miniature of archery objects, so this at least crosses the tribal border. On Sunday for the afternoon



service we sat in the audience with our new Pingwait friends. The celebrations ended with a torchlight parade winding through the

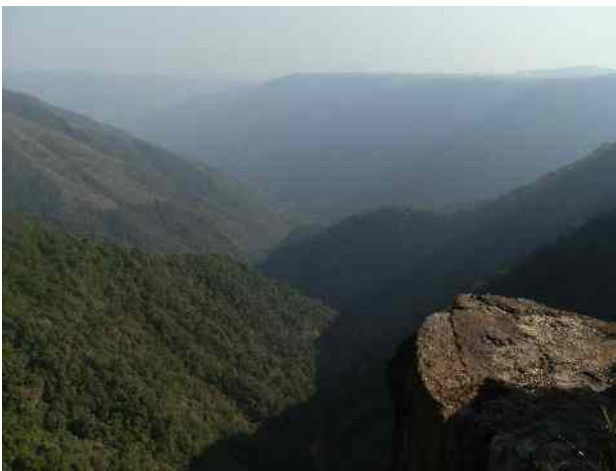


hilltop streets of Jowai, with throngs of Jowai citizens along the edge exclaiming at those of us from 'away' in native dress. We sang the hymns, translated into Khasi 125

years ago, at the top of our lungs with the accompaniment of a sound truck blaring what we called 'Country Khasi' – modern electric instruments and percussion and amped up vocals. We marveled at the bamboo torches, filled with kerosene and wrapped at the open end with cloth, refreshed occasionally by dipping the torch.



Monday, Revs. Pariat and Sutang sent us on a tourists' trip of the



Khasi Plateau to within a few miles of the Bangladesh border (which we could see from 3,000 feet above). We stopped at a river ravine, a Buddhist museum of Khasi tribal culture, a cave (which some of us thought the highlight of the trip), a major water fall, quiet in the dry season but still spectacular, and the border view near a hundreds foot high natural plinth.

The thing that will stay with us is the passion of the people for



their Unitarian faith which spurs them to ever wider knowledge of the world, commune with nature, and strengthening of community. We are grateful to have our expectations both dashed and exceeded, to have the great honor of being the First Universalist Unitarian Church of Nashville members to establish contact with our Partner Church. We were delighted to see flaming chalices everywhere, to find easy compatibility with those folks our age and of different ages, to visit sacred groves and witness sacred ceremonies of great antiquity, to see families and communities nurture each other and care for the land with passionate intensity, to see that even in a low cash economy people can thrive by joining together.

- on behalf of the Pingwait task force (Rev. Gail Seavey, Dr. Doug Pasto-Crosby, Ms. Jane Norris, Ms. Sasha Reed and Mr. Julian Raschke), Jim Seavey



Fairstar Bina, his son, and Kong Bria



The Mynsong sisters open the door



We meet at the church



We have lunch and tea at Kong Morolda Mynsong's house.



We stand together at Kong Mynsong's in Pingwait



Sasha and Julian greet some of the children at AMBCV



Doug, Jane, Julian (in back of), Gail and Sasha meet Gail and Jim's dear friends, Helpme and Lieki



The young women of Nontalong, on the Bangladesh border, prepare to take the stage for the traditional dance.



Revs. Darihun Khriam, Nongroi Sutang, Ms. Ibanylla Langstang, and Rev. Laiki Suchiang at the early service on Saturday at the Celebration and Conference. Lieki and Ibanylla both are from Mukhap, 36 km north of where they live in Jowai.



Revs. Helpme Mohrmen and Biron Talang at the Conference. Biron is a good friend of Jim and Gail's and though from Nontalong is Wanglang's counterpart north of Shillong.