

# A Description and Analysis of the Growth of the Church in Nepal.<sup>1</sup>

by John B.

35 Edgerton Rd., Mitcham, Melbourne, Victoria 3132, Australia

*John B. was born on the Indo-Nepal border and spent most of his childhood years in the hills of Nepal (1960 -1969). He returned with his family to serve with the United Mission to Nepal at Gandaki Boarding School in Pokhara from 1988-1996. He is married to Janine and they have 3 children – Kathryn, Nicholas and Aidan. He and Janine work as education consultants, with a particular focus on TCKs. Estimated time of writing – 2006.*

## **Synopsis:**

The growth of the church in Nepal since 1951 when the country opened to the outside world is a unique and remarkable story that has rarely been told. The story has a long pre-history prior to 1951 and there are several factors that prepared a solid foundation on which the Church was established. Growth in the first generation was slow, but the unique combination of mission and indigenous church operating separately but side by side, showing mutual respect and support, proved to be a sound basis for the rapid growth that has taken place in recent decades, and especially since the Democracy Revolution in 1990.

## **Introduction.**

Nepal was, until recently, the world's only Hindu kingdom. It is a captivating country for many reasons, not least the lure of the Himalayas and the fact that it was a closed land until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This tiny mountainous country had resisted the might of the British Empire since King Prithvi Narayan Shah from Gorkha (hence 'Gurkhas'), had unified the country into one kingdom in 1769 C.E. From 1848 until the middle of the twentieth century Nepal was controlled by the Rana Prime Ministers who had usurped the monarchy and had vested interests in keeping the world out.<sup>2</sup> Their century of control ended in a coup (facilitated by India) that resulted in King Tribhuvan Shah returning to power on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1951.

Nepal had also been totally closed to any Christian influence from the time of King Prithvi Narayan Shah; any known Christian in the country was expelled. The earliest recorded entry of Christians into Nepal was the visit of Father Cabral, a Jesuit priest, in 1628 (Perry 1989:2). Capuchin Monks were given permission by the Malla rulers to reside in the Kathmandu valley from 1715 until they were forced to leave by Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1769. The few national Christians were also expelled and migrated to Bihar, India (Lindell 1979:1-37; Perry 1989:1-9; Kehrberg 2000: 121-122). The exclusion of Christians continued for almost two centuries, with a growing community of Nepali Christians over the border in Darjeeling.

The revolution that restored the Shah dynasty to the throne in 1951 was a turning point for the country in terms of its development, and openness to the outside world. The story of the founding and growth of the Church in Nepal has been recorded in less than a handful of books<sup>3</sup> and appears to have escaped the notice of Church Growth scholars – surprising because the growth of the church in Nepal is amongst the fastest anywhere in the modern world.

From not a single known Christian residing in Nepal in 1950 (see below) the number of Nepali Christians has grown to an estimated six hundred thousand within fifty years; this growth of the Nepali Christian community in terms of baptised believers warrants analysis and explanation. This

---

<sup>1</sup> This was originally written as a paper for a 'Church Growth' course in the Australian College of Theology D.Min programme, December 2003.

<sup>2</sup> From 1881-1925 only 153 foreigners visited Nepal; none were resident. (Lindell 1979: 42)

<sup>3</sup> Lindell 1979; Perry 1989; Kehrberg 2000; Arnett 2002.

work pays greater attention to the gestation and formative years of the Church in Nepal, for it is here that the reasons for the growth of the church are found.

It will be helpful to use an analogy appropriate to the context of Nepal to describe the remarkable growth of the church there. Anyone who has spent at least a year in the hills of Nepal will be aware that life revolves around and is dependent on growing rice – the staple diet; no Nepali will consider a meal complete without rice. There are four distinct stages in growing rice:

- i) Preparing the ground – ploughing and fertilising the terraces where the rice will be planted and grow once the monsoon deluge begins in June.
- ii) Growing rice seedlings – small plots of fertile soil where rice grains are sown and grow prior to transplanting into the paddy fields.
- iii) Planting and growth – once the back-breaking work of transplanting the seedlings is done the rice grows rapidly in the hot wet monsoonal climate.
- iv) Harvesting coincides with the end of monsoon – and, like all agrarian societies, is marked with festivals to celebrate the occasion.

These four stages can be used to describe the history and growth of the church in Nepal.

### **i) Preparing the ground: background factors - seventeenth century to 1950.**

There are several significant factors that occurred over more than a century to prepare the soil in preparation for the entry of the Christian Gospel into Nepal after 1950.

First, from the time of William Carey there had been an interest in Christian mission to Nepal. The Serampore Translation of the New Testament was completed in 1821 and was used until the Bible Society translation of the New Testament (1902) and the Old Testament (1914) was completed.<sup>4</sup> Although less than 5% of Nepalese were literate in 1950, Christian literature was used to penetrate the borders sporadically during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, despite laws that prohibited the sale, possession or use of Christian literature in Nepal.<sup>5</sup>

Second, the protestant missions/ missionaries working in northern India looked towards the mountains of Nepal with a vision of taking the Gospel to the Himalayan Hindu kingdom. The maps below indicate graphically the clear intentions and readiness of many mission societies to enter Nepal when the opportunity came.<sup>6</sup> (Maps deleted to reduce file size). All the towns underlined in red (and more) had mission work amongst the itinerant Nepalese who crossed the border at various rail-heads, and with a vision to enter Nepal in the future.

There are many accounts of the high degree of anticipation and vision of many during what Perry refers to as the “century of preparation” (1979:23). Space permits reference to just four significant groups and locations.

- i) Darjeeling, on the eastern border of Nepal, was developed by the British and a large community of Nepalese settled there to labour in the tea plantations. Rev William MacFarlane, a Church of Scotland (CoS) missionary commenced the Eastern Himalayan Mission of the CoS in 1870 – a work that resulted in education, Christian literature and Bible translation, village evangelism - all important foundations for the future of the Nepali Church as this became the main centre for exiled Nepali Christians.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ganga Prasad Pradhan (see below) was instrumental in this translation work. Sadly, only 4500 copies of the whole Bible were printed so that during the first two and a half decades of the church’s growth in Nepal there were hardly ten copies of the whole Bible extant in Nepal, until a new Bible Society translation was published in 1977 (Perry 1989:41).

<sup>5</sup> Lindell (1979: 47-61) and Perry (1989:39-42) record the various means used to print and distribute Christian literature across the Indian border, especially from Darjeeling, into Nepal.

<sup>6</sup> Lindell lists twenty-five Christian missions (1979:115; also see Appendix 2). Perry lists forty groups operating along the borders in the century prior to the 1951 revolution (1989:116-118)

- ii) The Australian Nepalese Mission – had its humble beginnings in a prayer meeting in Fitzroy, Melbourne in 1911.<sup>7</sup> The founding missionary, John Coombe with his wife Lillian and two children established a base south of the Nepal border in Ghorasahan, Bihar in 1917. Their focus was always on Nepal and this small band of missionaries served in Ghorasahan until the ANM was incorporated into the Regions Beyond Missionary Union (RBMU) in 1948, none of the ANM missionaries ever entered the closed land just a few miles north.<sup>8</sup> Seemingly insignificant, the ANM represents several other groups/ missionaries who served faithfully in anticipation of Nepal’s borders opening.
- iii) The Regions Beyond Missionary Union and the Raxaul Medical Mission. Work by the RBMU had commenced in Bihar in the late nineteenth century, but their sights were on Nepal and the railhead border town of Raxaul, directly south of Kathmandu was strategically chosen as the site for the Duncan Hospital, established in 1930 by Dr Cecil Duncan, (son of CoS missionary Rev H.E. Duncan in Darjeeling). Gordon Guinness in *Quest of the Nepal Border* (c. 1928:118) wrote,
- Looking at the map and asking ourselves what place on the frontier is most ideally suited for a base of operations we are forced to one conclusion... RAXAUL. From Raxaul a doctor could be called to Kathmandu; from Raxaul Nepalese evangelists could tell their own countrymen the saving news. At Raxaul the passengers on the train could receive literature... Raxaul – the key to Nepal – He has given into our hands in the RBMU. May we be found faithful!
- The vital role played by the Duncan Hospital for the entry of both church and mission into Nepal will be seen below.
- iv) Nautanwa and the Nepal Evangelistic Band (NEB). Further west along the border, at Nautanwa, a lesser railhead, Dr Kitty Harbord of the Zenana Bible and Medical Mission (later BMMF and now Interserve) opened a dispensary in 1927. She recruited Dr Lily O’Hanlon and Hilda Steele who founded the Nepal Evangelistic Band (later the International Nepal Fellowship – INF) that pioneered the move into Pokhara, west of Kathmandu, in 1952 (see below). It was Harbord’s article “The Closed land of Nepal: A Modern Jericho”, circulated in 1939, that influenced many, including Jonathan Lindell,<sup>9</sup> and led to the formation of the Nepal Border Fellowship (NBF).

The NBF grew out of the conferences organised by Cecil Duncan in Raxaul (1934, 1937) and was a loose association that brought the various missions along the Nepal border together for encouragement, planning, prayer and co-operation. Harbord and Lindell developed this during the 1940s into the NBF and by 1948 there were annual conferences and specific areas of co-operation: Advisory Council, Literature Committee, Statement of Aims etc (Perry 1989:86-89). The seeds of mission co-operation in Nepal were sown in these conferences. Lindell’s handwritten letter to Harbord from the USA 20/10/47 reflects the level of faith and anticipation of the NBF:

My being here in the USA is obviously a hindrance...so please take over and do as you feel best. God will lead you...I stand with you in prayer. I have one strong word from the Lord about our commission. It is the story of how the Lord promised Paul Rome (Acts 23:11) but it took him 3 years before he got it. So with us and God’s promise concerning this land. We must say with Paul, ‘I believe God that it shall be even as it was told me’ (Acts 27:15).<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> My paternal grandparents were founding members of that group. Also, see footnote 32. \*This prayer meeting has continued uninterrupted to the present day – CHECK with JHB.

<sup>8</sup> Lillian Coombe died in 1941 and is buried in Calcutta; the epitaph on her tombstone reads: “Christian Ambassador To Nepal.” John Coombe was attacked by a mob in the ‘Quit India’ uprisings of August 1942 and narrowly escaped death; his injuries were so debilitating that he was repatriated to Australia. (Royal, M.I, n.d., unpublished booklet.)

<sup>9</sup> Lindell was with World Mission Prayer League missionary who went under the umbrella of WEC in order to gain a visa into India; from 1951 he was a pioneer of the work of UMN – see below.

<sup>10</sup> NCHP document AO11102 0003000

It was just over three years after writing this that King Tribhuvan opened Nepal to the waiting world and Lindell joined the vanguard of missionaries entering Nepal.

## **ii) The Seedlings: Nepali Christians and the Darjeeling church.**

There were several key Nepali men and women who became Christians during the ‘century of preparation’, along with exiled Christians who gathered at strategic border points, and especially in Darjeeling. Among many were:

Chandra Leela was the daughter of the Brahmin priest to the royal family in Kathmandu. Born in 1840, married at the age of seven, widowed at nine and orphaned at fourteen, she became a *sunyasi* (Hindu holy woman) and for seventeen years searched the depths of Hinduism in her quest for solace and peace. Eventually she abandoned her quest and soon after met a young girl with a Bible, which she read and became a Christian. She returned to Kathmandu to speak of her new faith; she baptised her older brother shortly before he died, but she then returned to India as an itinerant evangelist until she died.<sup>11</sup>

Ganga Prasad Pradhan was born into a wealthy Newar family in Kathmandu in 1851. At the age of ten he went with his father to join his older brother in Darjeeling. He was educated and converted in Rev MacFarlane’s CoS school. This led to a remarkable life of Christian service as “the first ordained Nepali pastor, translator of the Nepali Bible<sup>12</sup>, pioneer in Nepali literature, and owner of the first Nepali press...” (Perry 1989:29). In 1914 he returned with his extended family to Kathmandu to establish a Christian presence there, but they were expelled by the Rana regime with the words, “There is no room for Christians in Nepal.” A great legacy of Ganga Prasad was his hymn that for fifty years expressed the expectant prayers of the waiting clusters of missionaries and Nepali Christians:

Lord, hear our prayer, open the door of salvation for the Gorkhalis...  
Show us the way by a cloudy fiery pillar...  
There are cities – Thapathali, Bhatgaon, Patan, Kathmandu,  
Our prayer is to make them your devotees.  
Up brothers, we must go, leaving wealth, home, people and comfort,  
To do this holy task.<sup>13</sup>

Forty years after Ganga Prasad had been expelled his great grandson, Rajendra Rongong, was among the first group of Darjeeling Christians to return to Kathmandu (Kehrberg 2000:98).

Buddhi Singh, a humble watchmaker from eastern Nepal, converted in Darjeeling by Ganga Prasad, was for many years an itinerant village evangelist with the indigenous Gorkha Mission, an indigenous Nepali mission founded by Darjeeling Christians in 1892 to evangelise Nepalese. In his later years he influenced the young David Mukhia who, in 1952, became the first Nepali pastor at the Ram Ghat Church in Pokhara (Perry1989: 35-37; Arnett 2002:138-167)

Colonel Nararaj Shamsheer Jung Bahadur Rana was at the other end of the social scale, a member of the Rana aristocracy who retired from the Army and lived in the Terai, not far from Raxaul. He visited Duncan hospital with his sick grandson, met Ernest Oliver (then field leader of the RBMU, but later to become a founder of the UMN and its first Executive Secretary) and became a secret believer. He was baptised in Motihari on Easter Sunday, 1952, thus becoming the first resident Christian in Nepal, and was instrumental in hosting the first church services in his home in Kathmandu in April 1953 (see below). He was also a major contributor to the revised translation of the entire Nepali Bible published by the Bible Society in 1977.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> For details see Lindell 1979: 87-89 and Perry 1989: 15-17.

<sup>12</sup> Ganga Prasad completed this in 1914 after 40 years of labour; he was made a Life Governor of the British and Foreign Bible Society.

<sup>13</sup> *Nepali Khristiya Bhajan* #399; also see Lindell 1979:78; Perry 1989:33; Kehrberg 2000:96.

<sup>14</sup> In addition there were several other key Nepali Christians who contributed to the formative years of the church after the 1951 revolution. The stories of Bhim Dewan, Gyani Shah, Buddhi Singh, Nawalbir Rai, Tir and Ratan Dewan,

### **iii) Planting and growth: the first decades/ generation 1951-1990.**

When King Tribhuvan opened Nepal's borders he invited the world to assist in Nepal's development. It was then, and still is, by almost any criteria, one of the world's poorest countries. Three distinct groups of Christians converged to contribute to the formation of the church in Nepal.

Chronologically, the first group was foreign Christians entering from India, beginning with Father Moran, a Jesuit priest working in Patna, Bihar who established St Xavier's School on the edge of the Kathmandu valley in July 1951. The NEB, formed in 1943 by Dr O'Hanlon and Hilda Steele on the foundations of Dr Kitty Harbord's work in Nautanwa, was given permission to establish medical work in Pokhara. In October/ November 1952 members of the NEB who trekked over the hills for nine days comprised of six expatriates and five Christian Nepalese, including David and Premi Mukhia and Buddhi Sagar Gautam (others remained in Nautanwa and joined them later). The work of the 'Shining Hospital' (so called because it was housed in war surplus aluminium Quonset huts - the first such roofs to be seen in western Nepal!) became renowned and the mission developed into the International Nepal Fellowship (INF). Its work continues to be primarily medical, but has spread and diversified through many parts of western Nepal.<sup>15</sup>

Several remarkable coincidences led to the formation of the United Mission to Nepal. During the revolution fighting had taken place just over the border from Raxaul and wounded combatants from both sides were treated at Duncan Hospital. As a result of this service Dr Trevor Strong and Ernest Oliver were invited to visit Kathmandu after the revolution. They walked for several days and whilst in Kathmandu had an interview with B.P. Koirala, the Home Minister in His Majesty's Government of Nepal (HMGN), to explore the possibility of mission work. They were told that medical and educational work would be welcome, but open preaching prohibited. (Pritchard 1973:91) These discussions dovetailed with a separate approach by the authorities in Tansen, a large hill-town half way between Nautanwa and Pokhara, to American missionaries Bob and Bethel Fleming and Carl and Betty Friedericks (representing Methodist and Presbyterian missions). Contact had been made as a result of ornithological trips into Nepal in October 1949 and the winter of 1951-52 during which medical assistance had been given to the people of Tansen. Eventually a letter came from S.K. Dikshit in the Department of Foreign Affairs, permitting a hospital in Tansen and clinics in Kathmandu. (Lindell 1979: 140-142)

Lindell rightly refers to the foundation of UMN as "some of the finest missionary statesmanship that has been exercised in the modern missionary movement... the mistakes seen in India and other countries resulting from competition and independent action by denominational and separate organisations should not be repeated in Nepal." (1979:143) Methodist Bishop J.W. Pickett circulated an invitation letter from HMGN to other missions associated with the NBF in conjunction with the National Christian Council (NCC) of India with a view to "establishing a Christian mission in Nepal on the widest possible cooperative basis, a combined interdenominational and international approach." (Lindell 1979:144) The NCC endorsed this and the United Christian Mission to Nepal was founded in Nagpur in March 1954.<sup>16</sup>

There were eight founding missions (see Appendix 3 for details); Bishop Pickett was the founding President of the Board and Ernest Oliver the first Executive Secretary. The Flemings had already commenced medical work in Kathmandu in January 1954, and the Friedericks began work in Tansen in June 1954, but the work quickly expanded and diversified into other areas. The activities of the UMN have been clearly defined in five-yearly agreements with HMGN. There have always been clear prohibitions on proselytising, but the Christian nature of UMN and the personal faith of its

---

David and Premi Mukhia and Buddhi Sagar and Putali Gautam, and others are told in Lindell, Perry, Kehrberg and Arnett.

<sup>15</sup> The story of the NEB/ INF is told in Lindell and Perry, but thoroughly documented in the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary book compiled by Arnett (2002).

<sup>16</sup> At the request of the Foreign Secretary the name was changed to the United Mission to Nepal in 1956 (Lindell 1979:181).

workers is known and accepted. “The Mission takes the terms seriously... and has learned that its stay in Nepal rests on a mixture of invitation, permission and mutual agreement; that it is temporary ...that it is in partnership with Nepali society.” (Lindell 1979:200)

The second group was made up of the Nepali Christians, some mentioned above, but also a small and significant contingent of Darjeeling Nepalese. Whilst the missions were constrained by the terms of their agreements with HMGN from engaging in proselytising and church planting, the Nepali Christians seized opportunities to form small congregations of believers and to engage in Christian outreach. Nepal’s first church commenced in 1952 at Ram Ghat, Pokhara with David Mukhia as pastor. Others followed in the Kathmandu valley: Tir Bahadur became the pastor at Bhaktapur in 1954, and in 1956 Robert Karthak was appointed as Pastor of the small group that had arrived from Darjeeling in 1954-55, which later became Gyaneshwar church, the largest congregation in Nepal. Other Darjeeling Christians became an integral part of the work of UMN in remote projects in the hills and were instrumental in the establishment of small congregations. All these congregations have continued until the present day, many have grown into substantial churches and several have multiplied.

Another smaller group was four Christians from the Mar Thoma church in Kerala, south India who arrived early in 1953.<sup>17</sup> Led by C.K. Athyal, whose mother had been so challenged by Sadhu Sundar Singh’s accounts at the Marama convention in the 1920s of his trips through Nepal to Tibet that she dedicated her unborn child to be a missionary to Nepal, they joined with Colonel Shamsheer who hosted worship services in his house in central Kathmandu, until they were able, with his help, to purchase land and build Kathmandu’s first church building in Putali Sadak, opposite the Parliament buildings. (Lindell 1979:128-130; Perry 1989:60,95; Kehrberg 2002:99) Over the years there have been many other Christians from Kerala who have given exemplary, life-long service to Nepal, especially in the fields of education and medicine, and whose Christian witness and support to the fledgling church in Nepal has been very significant.

During this early phase numerical growth was gradual, but three important features should be noted: first, the Constitution and the legal code of Nepal prohibited conversion to another religion; there was a slow trickle of converts during these years and very few baptisms took place in any of the churches. Second, although NEB and UMN were not engaged in church planting activities and were not officially linked to any of the churches, there was a symbiotic relationship between the churches and the missions – there was mutual benefit and encouragement as the church was being established. Third, the churches’ independence from the missions is evidenced in three ways – the leadership was entirely Nepali; the churches were financially self-funding; and there were no denominations, each congregation was autonomous.

The end of the first decade was marked by two significant events. The first outbreak of official persecution by the state took place in Tansen following baptisms there in 1959 by Pastor David and in November 1960 by Prem Pradhan, recently appointed as pastor there. He and seven baptised believers were imprisoned in Tansen and the Supreme Court convicted them a year later: the women sentenced for six months, the men for twelve months and Prem Pradhan for six years (he was released by Royal Pardon after 4.5 years). Pastor David was included in the conviction but he moved across the border to Nautanwa until 1969. Sporadic arrests occurred elsewhere and this became the pattern for the next two decades. Persecution in the form of ostracism and vilification by families and communities was the common response to baptism - the sign of the transfer of allegiance from the majority faith to Christianity. (Perry 1989:103,110; Kehrberg 2002:105-109)

Second, although the few nascent congregations were autonomous and independent of the missions, it was the initiative of Ernest Oliver that resulted in the formation of the Nepal Christian Fellowship in 1960 that he said was “the most significant event in the first ten years of the church” (Perry 1989:109). Bishop Marcus Loane from Sydney was invited to address this first gathering of church

---

<sup>17</sup> These four were graduates of the Union Bible Seminary, Yeotmal (now UBS in Pune).

leaders and Nepali Christians, and Pastor David from Pokhara was appointed President.<sup>18</sup> After his exile to Nautanwa the NCF met there in 1962 and 1963 but in 1966 Pastor Robert Karthak was appointed President of the NCF and thereafter NCF met biannually in Nepal and “has been the means of bringing the autonomous young churches together for fellowship and mutual encouragement... This was an effective means of uniting almost all of the Christians in the country until the 1970s” (Perry1989:109-110).

There was not much to show in terms of growth after ten years, but a strong foundation had been laid for the future of the church in Nepal. Churches had been established in key areas, and wherever mission groups were working, but HMGN restrictions ensured that: church and Mission remained officially distinct; evangelistic activity was done by itinerant Nepali evangelists; and the churches remained non-denominational but were united in fellowship and purpose. Perry (1989:85) sums it up as follows: “the Nepali church was clearly set on an independent course... The stage was set for an explosion of growth over the next 20 years.”

During the next three decades there were several contributing factors to the growth and spread of the church.<sup>19</sup> First, an unprecedented degree of co-operation between various Christian groups: Darjeeling, Kerala, and expatriate members of missions; the unity resulting from the NCF; and the non-denominational nature of the church. Kehrberg (2000:116): “To the credit of all Christian Indians and expatriate Christians... there was mutual support and fellowship amongst the separate groups.”

Second, the rapid development of Nepal encouraged by HMGN, resulted in openness amongst the common people to new things. The expansion of missions, especially the UMN, into remote corners of Nepal inevitably resulted in new fellowships/ churches being established. At the same time the restrictions and constraints imposed by HMGN on missions/ missionaries ensured the independence of these churches. This was also intentional on the part of mission leaders, as has been noted above, and as Kehrberg (2000:116) observes, “Acknowledgement must also be given to the leaders of the mission in Nepal... With profound wisdom the mission leaders stood back and the Nepali Church embarked on its own without (unsolicited) interference.”

Third, the prohibition on conversion and the reality of persecution prevented nominalism and kept the church strong. Kehrberg (2000:106-1112) records several instances of state persecution during these years, including the arrest of Ramesh Khattri, Principal of the newly formed Bible School in Kathmandu and two pastors in the mid 1980s. Oppression of Christians increased along with the general political agitation against the government in the late 1980s. A Puebla Institute letter wrote: “the second half of 1989 marked another severe crackdown against Nepal’s Christians, with arrests, beatings, church closings and disruption of services... whereas one or two cases were recorded in 1970, 180 individuals were prosecuted in 1989. (NCHP:A1102010165000)

Fourth, most converts were young, vigorous and vibrant, with a keen sense of evangelistic outreach to the majority society. Also, family conversions were not uncommon, and there were occasional mass conversions. An example of this is the account by Howard Barclay and Bishop John Reid of Sydney who in August 1985 were the first foreigners to visit a number of Tamang villages in a remote area north-east of Gorkha that had become Christian through the witness of a young girl who had been converted. These largely illiterate new Christians had no resources and little knowledge of Christianity, including the sacrament of Communion that was explained and conducted for the first time by Bishop Reid.<sup>20</sup>

Fifth, retired Gurkha service men, who had been converted in both Indian and British armies, returned to their villages and established small Christian communities.

---

<sup>18</sup> From tape recording by Howard Barclay, November 2003.

<sup>19</sup> Kehrberg (2000:113,124) records the increase in churches in Kathmandu from 5 in 1976 to 30 by 1990, and the increase in baptised Christians in Nepal during the same period from 1400 to 50,000.

<sup>20</sup> Tape recording in my possession; see also Kehrberg 2000:126.

Sixth, despite the lack of trained pastors and church leaders new Christians were trained at Mirik Bible School in Darjeeling and UBS in Pune, and NCF sponsored short-term training schools and conferences. (See Kehrberg 2000:111;119-120;178-179)

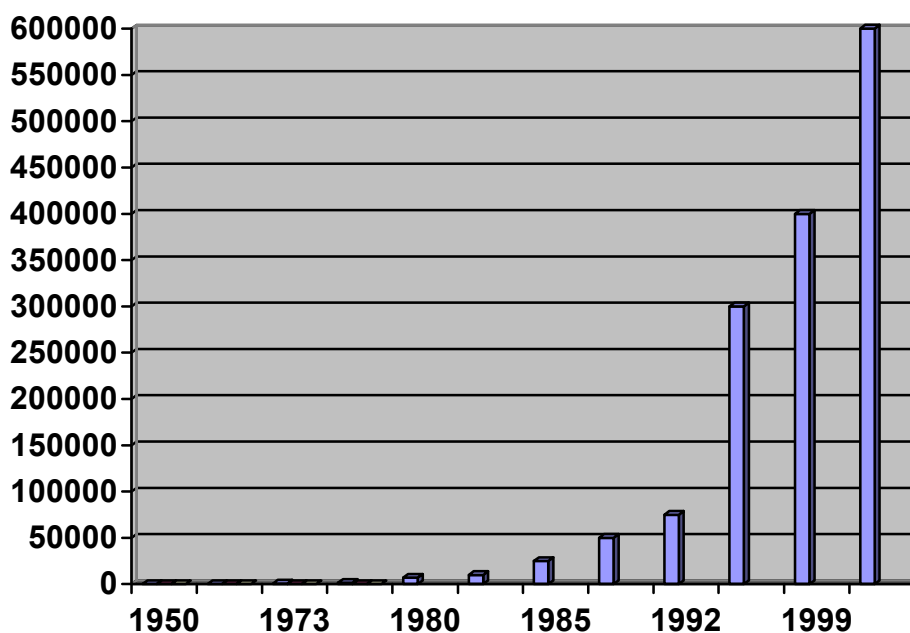
Seventh, Christian literature (including the Bible Society release of the new translation of the whole Bible in 1977) and radio (FEBC/ FEBA/TWR) spread the Christian message, including Bible correspondence courses undertaken by hundreds of Nepalese.<sup>21</sup>

Eighth, the Nepali songbook brought together various earlier collections of indigenous songs and hymns translated from English and Hindi.<sup>22</sup> But the predominant use of indigenous songs and tunes reflected the general pattern of indigenous worship, including meeting on Saturdays (Sunday being a working day in Nepal), gender segregated seating on the floor and other culturally appropriate practices.<sup>23</sup>

Betty Young, UMN Archivist adds the following points:

A very widespread means which God has used in the rapid spread of the Gospel is healing, not in any dramatic way, but quietly, one to another – there must be thousands who have come to the Lord through healing. Another answer given by Nepali Christians to explain why the church was growing so quickly was because it was a praising, worshipping church. (Betty Young, email of 1/3/2004)

#### **iv) Harvest: freedom and expansion, 1990 to the present.**



The dramatic events of the first half of 1990 mark a watershed in both the history of Nepal and in the growth of the Nepali Church. The growing opposition to the ‘party-less’ (Panchayat) political

<sup>21</sup> Perry (1989:119-123) documents the many sources of Christian literature and the process whereby they combined resources into the Nepali Isai Sahitya Sangha (NISS) in the 1950s-60s, which became Jiwan Jyoti Prakashan in 1968. Currently one of the largest publishing houses in Nepal, Ekta Publishers, is owned by a Christian family and publishes both secular and Christian books.

<sup>22</sup> A comprehensive revision, *Kristiya Bhajan* was published in 1985, a result of the work of Ron Byatt, Loknath Manaen and others (NCHP:A1010010007000).

<sup>23</sup> These points have been adapted from a paper by Howard Barclay presented to the UMN Annual Conference, 1980 (1980:NCHP, AO215010043000)

system, controlled by the King, gained momentum in 1988-89 as a result of several natural disasters<sup>24</sup>, an economic blockade by India, and the various banned opposition parties joining forces in a show of solidarity in their demands for political reform.

The protests burst into the public arena on the 18<sup>th</sup> February 1990, “Democracy Day” that commemorated King Tribhuvan’s return to power in 1951. The protests began peacefully but were harshly suppressed by the Palace-backed government. Weeks of brutal repression by HMGN forces fuelled the popular uprising; the protests grew more widespread and became more vigorous as the repression became bloodier. Two days after a very public massacre of more than 50 protestors in front of the Royal Palace on the 6<sup>th</sup> April, King Birendra announced the lifting of the twenty-nine year ban on political parties and a return to multi party democracy. An interim government made up of the leaders of the Democracy movement was installed under the leadership of NC’s K.P. Bhattarai. It was a year before general elections were held and a further six months before the new Constitution was promulgated, but there was a new atmosphere of freedom and hope replacing the repression of the previous three decades.<sup>25</sup>

The country took months to recover from the post-revolution upheaval. At that time there were about 60 Christians in jail and 200 cases against Christians pending in the courts. The general amnesty granted by the King on 24<sup>th</sup> June 1990 was welcomed, and marked a new era of freedom for Christians and the Church. However, there was little immediate change and whilst the new Constitution gave the right to every religious community “to maintain its independent existence...and to manage and protect its religious sites and trusts” it was difficult for Christian organisations to obtain official recognition and registration. And although “freedom to profess and practice his own religion...” was acknowledged, there was still the prohibition on conversion and the Civil Code specified penalties of up to three or even six years in jail. Nevertheless, Churches have found ways of owning land and buildings and public worship was open and without threat, but individuals continued to face persecution at personal and social levels, and sporadic cases of state persecution have continued through the 1990s.<sup>26</sup>

The public profile of Christianity is now recognised in many ways, not least by the fact that the 1991 census listed ‘Christian’ as one of the options in the religion category (Kehrberg 2000:124). Christians have regularly held public meetings and processions at Christmas and Easter, to which senior politicians and dignitaries have been invited.

But there have been concerns and negative consequences too. Denominationalism has entered Nepal, often by infiltrating existing churches.<sup>27</sup> Alongside this has been the fragmentation of the NCF into various groups (National Churches Fellowship of Nepal; Agape Churches; Four Square and Zion; El Shaddai etc.), although there is generally a good level of fellowship maintained between most of the churches. A large number of para-church organisations have emerged, both national and international.

---

<sup>24</sup> A violent hailstorm in April 1988 caused a stampede in the national football stadium in which 70 people died; in August 1988 a devastating earthquake in eastern Nepal caused 1200 deaths and destruction of buildings all the way to Kathmandu; the tower of Machendranath’s Chariot collapsed, as did a temple in Patan. All of these were interpreted as inauspicious signs that boded ill for the King.

<sup>25</sup> Since 1996 Nepal’s political situation has again been destabilised by the activities of the Maoist movement – an anarchical, anti monarchist guerrilla movement that through fear, terror and coercion poses a real threat to both monarchy and democracy in the country. The massacre of the Royal family in June 2001 stunned the world and gave rise to grave suspicions of treason within the country. Political upheaval continues with the instability of governments, culminating in the February 2005 sacking of the government and seizure of power by the King.

<sup>26</sup> A well-publicized case was the arrest and imprisonment for two years of eleven Christians near Ilam, eastern Nepal, in 1994. (NCHP:A1103010033000)

<sup>27</sup> In addition to the Catholics, the AOG church and Seventh Day Adventists had been present prior to 1990, but there are now several denominational churches including Presbyterian, Baptist, Four Square, as well as sects such as Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Mormons.

The missions have had to rethink both the nature of their work and their relationship to the churches. UMN and INF with their long links with both HMGN and the churches have undergone significant self-evaluation and change processes that have created some confusion and misunderstanding in some sectors of the Nepali Church.<sup>28</sup>

There continues to be a serious dearth in trained leadership, with very limited opportunities and facilities for pastoral and theological training in Nepal. The number of trained Nepali theologians is literally a handful. Dr Ramesh Khattri has a PhD in New Testament studies from Oxford University and heads up the fledgling Association for Theological Education in Nepal that will commence a B.D. program under the Serampore University in July 2005, as well as writing commentaries in Nepali.

The growth of the Nepali church continues apace outside Nepal too; with a Nepali Diaspora estimated at 6 million, there are Nepali congregations meeting in many cities of India and throughout the world. Central to this work is Dr Cindy Perry, Director of HIMserve based not far from Darjeeling in north east India, with a commitment to the peoples of the Himalayan region and to the Nepali Diaspora (estimated population of 10 million).

But the fact remains that the Church in Nepal has grown remarkably since 1950, and particularly during the past decade. It is not difficult to discern the parallels between the first generation of the Christian Church, set in the hostile context of the Roman Empire of the first century, and the first generation of the Christian Church in Nepal, but this is the subject of another work.<sup>29</sup>

#### v. Conclusion.

The remarkable growth of the Nepali Church can be attributed to a mix of factors, historical, theological, and missiological. The ‘century of preparation’ included Christian literature, translation of the scriptures and development of Nepali songs. Key Nepalese became Christian and missionaries were strategically placed around the borders, ready to enter Nepal. Expatriate missionaries and Nepali Christians showed wisdom, humility and foresight to ensure that proven errors (in mission practice) were not repeated. Nepali Christians showed great courage in the face of persecution, but this in turn refined and purified the church in the early decades. External factors such as the political revolutions of 1951 and 1990, and the Nepali language as the *lingua franca* (as Greek was in the first century) have been additional catalysts in the growth of the Church. The Church is made up of the whole spectrum of Nepali society and there is no more dramatic demonstration of the Gospel’s power to transcend the entrenched social barriers of caste, and unify disparate and segregated groups in the mosaic of Nepali society, than the Lord’s Supper in a Nepali Church – as men and women, young and old, high caste, tribal and *dalit* break bread and share a common cup.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps the most significant factor and certainly the single most recurring theme in the short history of the Nepali Church is the place of prayer. A quarter of a century before Nepal’s borders opened Gordon Guinness (c.1928: 116-117) wrote these prophetic words:

Prayer can penetrate anywhere. Long before we enter the valley of Nepal prayer can be doing a concrete work in laying the foundations for the future kingdom... When we have prepared the way with the Spirit of God in prayer, he will answer those very prayers in permitting us to occupy Nepal.

The truth of these words is seen in Ganga Prasad’s prayer-song; the NEB prayer groups across Britain spawned by Kitty Harbord’s enthusiasm; John Coombe’s prayer group in Fitzroy, Melbourne

---

<sup>28</sup> I have a copy of an open letter addressed to UMN (19<sup>th</sup> August 2003) signed by three senior Nepali Christians that questions UMN’s identity as a Christian mission and attempts to distance the Nepali Church from UMN.

<sup>29</sup> McDowell, P., unpublished essay, ‘Early Church History in Nepal’.

<sup>30</sup> The Pasadena Consultation of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (1978:6,7) states: “For Christ the Lord gives to his people... a new homogeneity which transcends all others, for now they find their essential unity in Christ rather than in culture... we should seek to express and experience these things at the Lord’s Supper, which God intends to be a foretaste of the Messianic banquet in his Kingdom...”

- of which one foundation member prayed for 40 years until Nepal's borders opened, and then prayed for another 40 years until she died in 1990 at the age of 97;<sup>31</sup> The NBF (and later NPF) who joined together and prayed for decades in anticipation of Nepal's borders opening; Ernest Oliver and Trevor Strong praying as they overlooked the Kathmandu valley in April 1951 (Pritchard 1973:91); Elizabeth Franklin who prayed for 23 years before entering Nepal; the Kerala mother who, like Hannah, prayed for a son and then dedicated him to be a missionary in Nepal... the list is too extensive to record and continues today.<sup>32</sup> Each one points to the fact that the Church in Nepal is nothing less than the sovereign work of God.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY.**

- Arnett, M. 2002, Himalayan Vision: 50 Years In Nepal - The Story Of The INF, International Nepal Fellowship, Pokhara, Nepal.
- Barclay, J.H., 1980, The Growth Of the Church In Nepal, unpublished paper presented to UMN Workers' Conference, Kathmandu, (NCHP, AO215010043000).
- Barclay, J.H. 2003, tape recorded recollections of the Church in Nepal.
- Coombe, J. H. c. 1946, A Wonderful Deliverance, Keswick Book Depot, Melbourne.
- Guinness, G. M. c. 1928, The Quest For The Nepal Border, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, London.
- Kehrberg, N. 2000, The Cross In The Land Of The Khukuri, Ekta Books, Kathmandu.
- Lindell, J. 1979, Nepal And The Gospel Of God, United Mission To Nepal, Kathmandu.
- McGavran, D. 1955, Bridges Of God, Friendship Press, New York.
- McGavran, D. 1980, Understanding Church Growth, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Zondervan, Grand Rapids.
- Nepal Church History Project (NCHP), Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World, New College, University of Edinburgh, privately obtained collection of scanned archival documents on CD.
- Perry, C. 1990, A Biographical History Of The Church In Nepal, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, Nepal Church History Project, Kathmandu.
- Pickett, J. W. 1933, Christian Mass Movements In India, Lucknow Publishing House, Lucknow.
- Pickett, J. W., Warnshuis, A.L., Singh, G.H., McGavran, D.A. 1955, Church Growth And Group Conversion, Lucknow Publishing House, Lucknow.
- Pickett, J. W. 1963, The Dynamics Of Church Growth, Abingdon Press, New York.
- Pritchard, E. 1973, For Such A Time, Victory Press, Eastbourne.
- Reid, J. & Barclay, J.H. 1985, tape recorded account of visit to Jharlang Christians, Dhading District, Nepal.
- Royal, M. I. n.d., Jesus Only - The Story Of John Coombe, Pioneer Missionary To Nepal, privately published.

---

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Barclay, my paternal grandmother.

<sup>32</sup> Bhab Ghale, son of a Gurkha soldier converted in the 1960s, co-ordinates 'Prayer For Nepal Global Network' – [www.prayerfornepal.org](http://www.prayerfornepal.org).