



Lalhlupuii Sailo



Muana and Villy, with Yindii and Zoe



Mazuala and Esther, with Puia

PARTNERS IN MISSION

On a hot, sultry day in June 1968, a young married Mizo couple, Rokhama and Lalrichami (Chami), alighted from a bus at the Global Interaction mission in the village of Debitola on the central plains of Assam in India. They carried their entire possessions in a small, metal trunk. For some days they had travelled the serpentine roads of the Lushai Hills (now Mizoram) in the southeast corner of the state, descending to Silchar and then west along the great Bramaputra Valley to their destination.

It had been a long journey for Rokhama in more ways than one. For a number of years he had nurtured a desire to engage in cross-cultural mission. He was thinking of other people groups in India beyond the comfortable boundary of his own tribal culture. He shared his heart with the leaders of the Baptist Church of Mizoram (BCM). But they were unable to accommodate his passion. Instead they suggested he train for the pastoral ministry. He heeded their advice, took degrees in Arts and Theology and was ordained as a pastor of a local church.

Unknown to Rokhama, God had another scenario! In the late 1960s the Indian government began to restrict the activities of foreigners, including missionaries, particularly in sensitive border areas like Assam. The chief concern of the departing Global Interaction staff was the nurture of the fledgling church amongst the Rabha tribal people. The Rabha Christian community numbered less than a hundred. Only two churches had been established – Debitola and Shapkata. There were no trained pastors.

Rev Rex Glasby and his wife Peggy had pioneered the Rabha work fifteen years earlier. Rex was a man of insight and action. He saw the strategic significance of appointing national missionaries to take over the work of the departing Global Interaction staff. The Mizo church was known throughout northeast India for its growth and vigour. Rex turned to the Mizo Baptist leaders for help. Rev Neville Kirkwood, who succeeded Rex, pursued the contact after the Glasby family left for Australia in 1967.

The BCM leaders warmed to the Global Interaction initiative. Rokhama and Chami were assigned and commissioned for a cross-cultural posting at Debitola – where they remained for more than thirty years! Throughout much of this period Rokhama was the BCM Field Director for Assam.

Today the Rabha Baptist Church Union boasts a membership of more than 10,000. It is a literate church – with many educated pastors and leaders. Debitola is a centre of activity: pastor training, schools and

hostels, translation and production of Christian literature, weaving and medical services.

In the years following the departure of Global Interaction staff from the Rabha work in Assam, the Global Interaction and BCM leaders maintained regular correspondence with each other, principally through the Rev Thana Chungnunga who occupied a number of senior positions in the BCM leadership for more than three decades. The relationship was enhanced in the early 1970s when Chungnunga undertook a year of study at Whitley Bible College in Melbourne.

However, for a period of almost thirty years from the mid 1960s, the political situation in Mizoram prevented the free entry of foreigners and fellow Indians from other parts of the country. These restrictions were partly ameliorated immediately prior to the celebration for the Gospel Centenary in Mizoram in January 1994. Restricted Area Permits were made available to visiting church and mission leaders from other Indian states and abroad.

Rev Clarrie Edwards and I had the good fortune to receive an invitation from BCM to attend the Centenary celebrations. We hitched ourselves to a party of a dozen or so British Baptists representing the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS), the organisation which had a seminal role in the planting and development of the church in Mizoram.

The Gospel Centenary was a grand occasion. On the day of the main celebrations, Clarrie and I gathered with 22,000 Baptists in the military parade in the centre of Mizoram's second city, Lunglei, in the south of the state. I felt very much an interloper, as Global Interaction had had no direct involvement in the development of the church in Mizoram. But in my greeting to the crowd I spoke of Mizo and Australian Baptist hands joining in Assam – in the rural village of Debitola. The point was not lost on the gathering. Rokhama, Chami and their family were equally known, loved and supported by Mizo and Australian Baptists alike.

In the years since the Gospel Centenary the relationship between the two missionary bodies has grown ever stronger. Today Australian and Mizo Baptists are partners in mission in Thailand and China; and, hopefully, in the coming year, South East Asia.

In January 1996, Clarrie and I accompanied a group of predominantly young people to Mizoram. Among other things, the visit was an opportunity for cultural exchange and providing workshops – mainly for



R and B



Dema and Carolyn, with Grace and Daniel



Jenis Bawitlung

youth leaders – on teaching English as a second language and church music skills and styles.

Two years later I took another group to Mizoram – of not-so-young people – including an orthopedic surgeon, an x-ray and ultrasound technician, English teachers, women skilled in various forms of craft work and a number of very experienced pastors. All put their professional and other skills to good use.

In the months prior to my first visit to Mizoram in 1994, Rokhama had a serious illness and spent several weeks in Guwahati General Hospital in Assam. His son, Vanlalmuana (Muana) feared his father was dying. At the time Muana was completing a Master's degree of Science in Shillong. Thereafter, he anticipated a career in science or teaching. The possibility of his father's death prompted Muana to follow in his father's footsteps. Rokhama fully recovered from his illness; and, shortly afterwards, Muana wrote to Global Interaction expressing an interest in cross-cultural missionary service. During the Centenary celebrations in Lunglei, BCM accepted Muana as a candidate in training and, on my return from India, Global Interaction finalised a "Cooperation in Mission" agreement with BCM.

In the years immediately following the Gospel Centenary the Global Interaction/BCM relationship flourished. BCM was open to engaging with their Australian friends in joint mission endeavours among unreached people groups in Asia. In pursuit of this ideal, I travelled to Thailand and China in 1998 with the BCM Associate Secretary – Missions, Rev Chalbua. The purpose of the visit was to prepare for the placement of Muana and his Naga wife, Villy Zhimomi, in the ethnic Thai program, and to explore the possibility of BCM graduates joining their Australian counterparts teaching English in various universities in China.

The following year four Mizos were accepted by BCM for service in China: Thangridema Pachuau (Dema), Lalhlupuii (Puii) Sailo, Lalthanzuali (Zuali) Hauhna and Esther Lalhmachhuani. The outgoing of these promising young people was delayed due to the hesitation of some universities in accepting teachers who were not "native speakers of English". The hesitation was unnecessary given all four BCM candidates had undertaken their entire secondary and tertiary education in English.

With the assistance of Clarrie Edwards – who had become the Global Interaction team leader in China – Dema began teaching in 2001. He was followed by Puii, Carolyn (Dema's wife) and a new candidate, R*

in 2003, then Jenis Bawitlung in 2004, Matana in 2005 and R's wife, B*, in 2006.

For the past nine years, Muana and Villy have been part of the Global Interaction team in northern Thailand. Shortly they will be joined by Dema and Carolyn and their two children. Dema and Carolyn have been in South Australia for most of this year building their financial and prayer support base. They join the team in Thailand this very month.

The most recent staff members seconded by BCM to Global Interaction are Mazuala and Esther. They are currently in Queensland. Like Dema and Carolyn, they are developing their partnership team – in readiness for service with Global Interaction staff in South East Asia.

At the beginning of the 1990s, missiologist Arthur Glasser said the internationalisation of the missionary force was the new thing God was doing in our time. Glasser spoke with prophetic insight; and the Global Interaction/BCM relationship is an example of what he meant.

Chris Barnden, Director of Ministries with Global Interaction, has been excited to see the relationship between Global Interaction and the Baptist Churches of Mizoram grow significantly in the past years. At the signing of the formal Memorandum of Understanding between the two organisations in 2007, Chris commented: "We were wondering how we were going to keep building our cross-cultural teams. We so appreciated the calibre of people like Muana and Villy, R and B and others in China, and so naturally the idea came of pursuing staff from Mizoram Baptists to become part of all our cross-cultural teams, rather than just our China teaching team. The success of Muana and Villy as team members and as cross-cultural workers, plus the way the Mizos fitted in so well as team members and workers in China gave me confidence that they would make good team members in other places as well."

What makes this Australian/Mizo cross-cultural relationship work so well? It has something to do with a strong awareness of our "oneness" in Christ, a shared vision for unreached people, similar missiological understandings and a mutual commitment to well-prepared missionary staff.

CHRIS PITTENDRIGH

*Note: some names are changed for security reasons