

## **Mizo Christian encounter with Muslim labourers: A case of the *Ramhlun Masihi Sangeethi Kendra***

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The Mizo Church<sup>1</sup> is arguably on the margins within the federal structure of India and yet, in its own context in the North East, it is strong, wealthy and vibrant. It may be 'remote' from the religiously diverse masses of India, but its work among Muslim labourers connects it with the rest of the country. This also draws it into the broader context of Muslim Christian relations in India and beyond.

This paper focusses particularly on *Masihi Sangeethi Kendra* (MSK) of the Ramhlun Presbyterian Church, Aizawl as a case of the Mizo Christian encounter with Muslim labourers. These Muslim labourers come to Mizoram to earn their living but are separated from their families back home for long periods of time. Since Mizoram is a restricted area, all non-Mizos need a permit to visit or reside in the state. Being reliant on permits, these poor Muslim workers are often under constant threat of being deported out of the state. In Mizoram, therefore, they form the lowest rung of the society with little economic and political influence. In the Mizo social hierarchy, the Church occupies a relatively exalted position; their intentional choice to relate with those on the very margins, therefore, is indicative of their sense missional commitment to engage with them despite their difference.

The key themes this paper hopes to highlight will be: i. the notion of vulnerability involving the poor Muslim labourers in a relatively wealthy and majority Christian state; ii. The notion of hospitality where at least one specific case of MSK empirically demonstrates how the church seeks too to become vulnerable in order to relate with Muslims despite wider criticism.

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<sup>1</sup> The Masihi Sangeethi Kendra (MSK), is a programme under the Synod Mission Board (SMB) of the Mizoram Presbyterian Church (MPC). The MPC which makes up 60% of the 87% of Christian population in the State of Mizoram has been involved in mission among people of other faith since around 1961 under the SMB, working mainly among the Gurkhas (Hindus) who have been brought in by the British during the late 19th century. By the 1980s the SMB started working among the Bengali Muslim migrant workers from the Barak Valley of Assam under the programme called the Non-Mizo fellowship presently known as *Masihi Sangeethi Kendra* (MSK). They are mainly daily wage labourers working in construction sites. Muslims make up about 1.3% of the state population of 1,091,014. The percentage is taken from the Government census of 2011.