

THE RICHMOND AND HOUNSLOW CIRCUIT



Tsunami!

In a global city like London events in every part of the world have an impact. This was particularly the case when on Boxing Day 2004 news began to reach our homes of the tsunami that devastated so many countries around the Indian Ocean.

Rev. Barnabas Alexander was immediately effected. Born in the east of Sri Lanka when it was still called Ceylon, he describes himself as a 'Ceylon Tamil'. He left as a young man to study and work in Canada. There he was ordained as a Baptist minister. He moved to London and returned to work in the Methodist Church in which he was brought up. He has been a minister in the Richmond and Hounslow Circuit for the last five years.

Below are notes of a conversation with Barnabas about the impact of the tsunami on him and his family.

What were your first thoughts on hearing the news of the tsunami?

I was in north London staying with relatives. In the early hours of the morning there was a gentle knock on the door...my wife and I were told that there was flood: sea water had entered the towns and villages in the east coast and other parts of Sri Lanka...many have died!! News was vaguely trickling in. Floods? Yes. Tsunami? No way. It did not enter our mind at the time...but only shock and horror.

How did you respond? What was the impact on your faith?

Numbness. It was too much to handle. As usual I became quiet. A deep darkness descended on our household. My wife couldn't contact her brother in the east coast by phone. She panicked...wept her eyes out. There was grief. The visual impact (via TV) was too great. We prayed; we mumbled a few words with deep sighs... We learnt later that while my wife's brother and his wife were safe, her family had completely vanished.

How have the churches in your Circuit responded?

They responded marvelously. I decided to leave for Sri Lanka on January 1st. I had nearly 30 some boxes to take with me...all gifts from Circuit and other churches. With the help of my wife SAS Air Lines arranged to take these items for free. On the recommendation of my Super, the Circuit granted me leave to go. That was a splendid gesture of compassion.

What still needs to be done for the people affected?

This is a difficult question. There is a political dimension to this as well. There are still many Tsunami survivors who are living in flimsy shelters. Aid - both in kind

and money was received but at distribution corruption is a sad reality on the ground. This makes me "hopping mad."

Is there a particular prayer that has helped you through all this?

I found a prayer in Methodist Recorder (Thursday, January 13, 2005) that articulated the depth of our grief succinctly, without muddling us up in pious cliches - "*Lord God, I find it hard to believe when an earthquake shakes the ocean and towering waves destroy the homes of thousands, scattering their dead upon the sea shore...As you weep, I worship you;...*"

QUESTIONS:

- Barnabas speaks of the impact of the news through the TV, but news soon slips from the headlines. In our global city natural disasters and other tragic situations effect so many people and their pain goes on. From your church members and other friends who do you know that has been effected by this sort of tragedy? What do you think are the best ways we can support them, individually and as a church?
- Are there times that you are comfortable to share when you have received bad news? How did you react? From your own experience what sort of help do people need at such a time?
- What can the church do to support Barnabas and others like him in the face of the sort of problems that he describes as making him 'hopping mad'?
- What is your reaction to the prayer that Barnabas found so helpful? What do you think he might mean in his comments by 'pious cliches'? What sort of examples have you come across? What can we do to avoid that sort of thing?

Bible Study: one of the passages Barnabas found especially challenging during this experience has been was given to him in the form of questions by survivors:

Psalm 42:7

This short study invites you to reflect on the whole of Psalm 42.

- What times have there been that you are happy to talk about from your own experience when you have felt a longing for God? Where might we see such a longing in today's world? How can the church best respond?
- In what sorts of situations might this Psalm most appropriately be used?
- Verses 4 and 5 talk about the memory of joy in worship and the struggle to hang on to that memory in the face of difficulty and pain? In your experience how important is the joy of worship in coping with the struggles that life brings? What do you think should be the consequences of this for the church?

- Think of times when you have sensed that family members, friends or other people are being overwhelmed by the struggles of life? What are the best ways you have found to help them? What special resources does the church have and how might they best be used?
- In times when people are 'cast down' (v. 11) by the tragedies of life, what is the best way that the church in a global city like ours can encourage them to 'hope in God'?