

In January Bill Hampson of Lowton Independent Methodist Church and the Epiphany Trust travelled to Sri Lanka to observe the devastation caused by the Asian tsunami disaster. Accompanied by his son Micah, Bill visited to some of the worst affected areas and compiled reports not only for the Trust but for the councils of Liverpool and Wigan, who were keen to get involved in the relief effort.

SRI LANKA DEVASTATED

By Bill Hampson

The sheer size of the humanitarian tragedy of the Asian tsunami is almost incomprehensible. The pictures on television and the newspaper reports I had read did little to prepare me for what I would find in Sri Lanka and the initial feelings of helplessness over what can be done.

In recent years Epiphany Trust has worked with churches in both Kandy and the tea plantation areas of the hills around Nuwara Eliya to provide care and education for physical and learning disabled children.

I have visited Sri Lanka on several occasions and have a deep affection for the country. The first time I went there was to play cricket (Sri Lankans are cricket fanatics) and though I didn't make many runs, I did make many friends.

Over the years I have established good relationships with church leaders in Kandy from several denominations, all of whom had been in regular telephone and email contact since the tragedy.

Pastor Sylvester from Smyrna church wrote to me saying:

“Many of our churches have been hit. In the east, people are without anything and many lives are lost, some during morning services. Where bodies were found, the churches held funerals. Kaluvanchikudi is completely gone. Pastor Sunil lost his home but is safe. Rev Ranjan is still missing. In Trincomalee church members have lost everything and are in refugee camps. We have taken the responsibility to feed them and provide other needs. In Batticaloa the church is taking care of more than 1,000 people. Pastor Ravi's daughter and a few of the church members have gone to be with the Lord. Dear Bill, these people are asking help from us, we sent food and clothes. Apart from this they need other essentials such as candles, mats, flashlights, crockery, pots and pans, bedding etc”.

We immediately made available £5,000 and launched an appeal, which to date has raised more than £14,000 from churches around our area. This has enabled us to support aid trips to the devastated east coast.

On February 8 Sylvester wrote: *“We started early morning to visit the camps around Batticaloa. It was terrible, survivors are in a camp, far away from the town, even very difficult to go to hospital or buy anything, no transport, no schools, no shops. They are given a small hut for the time being. They put up a tent with coconut leaves for the roof – this for four months until the Government puts up a permanent building – not sure when it will happen. We gave them suitcases, saucepans, lanterns, cookers, bed sheets, soap, towels and combs, for seventy families. They were very happy, we told them this is from your churches.”*

Sylvester is the pastor of a Smyrna Evangelical church in Bogawantalawa. Most churches of this denomination are based in the hill country or on the east coast, but almost all of the latter were destroyed by the tsunami.

The hill country churches run vocational programmes and special schools for children with disabilities. Micah, who had been able to join me in Colombo, and I went to see some of the work there for a few days and were most impressed. One thing that struck me strongly was how keen they were to establish links and how similar to our Independent Methodist connexion the Smyrna churches organisation is. The current situation presents great opportunities for our churches to form links, to share and to give encouragement.

I arrived in Sri Lanka in mid-January with a list as long as my arm of people and places to visit and several hats to wear.

One of those was from the City of Liverpool, whom I had been asked to represent in a meeting with the mayor of Galle and later with the Sri Lankan Prime Minister. Galle was badly affected by the tsunami and Liverpool wished to make an offer to “adopt” the city to assist in its reconstruction through their new charity “Hands Across The Sea”.

Galle estimates it has lost around 10% of its 100,000 population. Everyone in the city has heart-rending stories of the day the tsunami struck.

The wave there hit the maternity hospital, killing all the mothers, newborn babies, doctors, nurses and porters and there were no survivors. A church where worshippers were attending the 9.30 service was also hit, and all were drowned. The mayor told me that one school that had just reopened lost 863 of its 2,500 pupils.

But amongst the most tragic stories were some miraculous ones too. One six-year-old boy was washed out to sea and survived for two days and nights by clinging onto a log. He said he had not been worried because at school he had been read the story of Robinson Crusoe by his teacher and he dreamed of being washed up on a desert island. Remarkably, he eventually drifted back to a beach just a few miles from his home.

Christian City Church, Kandy, is doing rebuilding and rehabilitation work in Kalutara on the west coast and Hambantota in the south. Micah and I travelled with their teams to both towns and once again found it almost impossible to take in the scale of devastation.

In Hambantota every building within half a mile of the sea and many beyond were totally destroyed. Every family, it seems, has lost someone. One Muslim lady, who sat outside the tent she shared with the few survivors of her family, told me that she had lost her husband and all her four children. A Christian man who repairs engines on the fishing boats lost his wife and two teenage children. His 20-year-old daughter is so traumatised she has gone to live as far away from the sea as possible. He now sits daily amidst the rubble that was his home, seemingly unable to comprehend what has happened.

Timothy, Dilshan, Debbi and Roshan are energetic young people from Kandy and are involved in the reconstruction of homes in Kalutara. When asking people like this what the best thing we could do to help is, they reply, "get people to come over here and help us". It was a message repeated to us by civic and church leaders and the homeless folks themselves. I have since passed the message on to the Wigan Borough Council, who asked us to find out what they could do, and they are hoping to get volunteers to go out there.

I recently spoke about my visit, and showed photographs to members of churches who have given such tremendous support. To the question “what can we do” I suggested three things. To give, not only our money but our time to write and encourage, to “adopt” or “twin” our churches with those in Sri Lanka to let them know they are not forgotten. To go, either with a team to do practical work or just to visit brothers and sisters who have been through so much. To pray. The most important thing of all is to pray for them, there are many things we can do, but only the Lord can heal.

If you wish to help please contact Bill at 13 Winwick Lane, Lowton, Warrington WA3 1LR or email bill@epiphany.org.uk