

## Mission Trip to Sri Lanka January 2005 - Tsunami Relief

**21 January 2005** - We were to depart from RDU Airport, but our flight was canceled due to mechanical problems. The airline only had two persons to work the rebookings. They kept telling me that I couldn't rebook until I claimed my luggage. After a couple of hours we discovered that our bags had been sent on to Washington. We were then booked on another airline that took us to Zurich via New York and London. When we finally arrived Zurich, we had missed our Emirates Airline flight to Sri Lanka via Dubai. However, we easily were rebooked to a later flight on Sri Lankan Airways connecting through The Maldives. Our arrival in Sri Lanka was only about 3 hours later than we had originally planned.

**23 January 2005** – Our luggage did not arrive with us, so we had to file a lost luggage claim before exiting security. Rev. Fernando was waiting for us. I had called him from New York to let him know we might not make it Sunday, then again from Zurich to let him know we would arrive on Sunday after all. He summoned the van and we headed for the hotel to freshen up. Though only about 30 miles from the airport, it took a good hour and a half to reach the hotel because of the traffic. After a brief stop, we headed to St. Mark's Church, an Anglican church in Moratuwa where we are to distribute food parcels and sleeping mats to refugees.

We arrived at the church in the midst of a terrible thunderstorm. The church was crowded with individuals representing 75 families who had lost everything. One by one they came forward and gratefully accept the food parcels and sleeping mats which we gave them. Several said, "Thank you," in accented English. In a short period of time we distributed a lorry full of supplies. Other folks were in attendance who were not on the list to receive food this day. The volunteers apologized, reminding several of them that they received supplies last week and that they will be on the list next time. The needs are so great, and the available resources must be stretched to help as many families as possible for as long as possible.



**24 January 2005** – Our day begins early as we are picked up from the hotel to visit the Moratuwa Beach Community. I well remember the last time I was here. In January 2004 the medical mission team from Littleton United Methodist Church conducted a medical clinic here. We had been welcomed with garlands of flowers and led by deaf dancing girls in beautiful costumes down the narrow path crowded with wooden shacks. I am stunned by the difference today. There are no garlands of flowers, no dancing girls, no smiling faces...and no houses. We walked across the open sand to the place where the little building stood which housed the Beach Children's' Ministry Project. We had conducted our medical clinic in this building the previous year. The building is gone, washed away by the powerful tsunami, leaving only the red concrete floor. Rev. Fernando points to the concrete, "Brother, this is where our building stood. Thank God the children weren't here that day!" I felt a wave of emotion welling up inside me as I grieve for the losses of this community. Then a white-haired elderly woman approached us. I remember her from previous visits. She begins to weep saying, "Please help me. I have no home. I have lost everything. What will happen to me?" I look at Binky as she, too, is feeling the emotion of the moment. Rev. Fernando promises to help her find a place to live.

Then we walked over to a different part of the community to talk to some of the fishermen. One man said, "We have seen no politicians, we have received no help from the government. Only Pastor Fernando and some of the churches have helped us." We asked about the possibility of buying a fishing boat to re-employ some of the fishermen. They were very excited as they told us they could manage their own recovery if only they could get back to work. They estimate the cost of the nets and the type of boat they use to be about \$3000. This would put 8-10 fishermen back to work supporting their families, putting protein back into the food supply, and enabling them to manage their own recovery. I asked Rev. Fernando to identify a fisherman for this project.

We made our way back to the van and proceeded to drive down the coast, stopping to pick up a German pastor, Rev. Kurt Stappenbeck who would be joining us. I had driven down this road before and remember it to have been crowded with houses of all types, from wooden shanties to modern brick and concrete homes, and even a number of hotels and other businesses. Most are gone now. At first we snapped photo after photo. After a while we became numb to it all, and only took photos of something really noteworthy like a boat in the road.

We stopped at the site where the passenger train had been washed off the tracks by the force of the water. The cars have been set back on the tracks and have become a sort of memorial attracting relatives of those who died, as well as the curious. More than 1500 train passengers died and three coaches were never found, being assumed to have washed out to sea. We saw a pitiful little family living under a piece of plastic stretched across some bricks, which I assumed were the scavenged remains of their home. They apparently hope to rebuild.



All along the highway we saw clean water tanks provided by the Red Cross. We also passed two units of US Marines who were helping clean up schools. And we saw tents that had been donated for the refugees from a number of different countries. Otherwise we saw little evidence of any massive organized clean-up or rebuilding effort.

When we traveled through Galle on the southwest tip of the island, we recognized the bus terminal and other features from the news reports. Galle was where the buses were floating past the terminal on frequently shown news footage of the disaster. The city is slowly beginning to clean up and rebuild.



One of the greatest shocks awaited us in the town of Hambantota on the southeast corner of the island. Here they were in a direct line from the earthquake off the western coast of Sumatra. The tsunami may have reached heights upward of 40 feet in this area. The town, located on a peninsula between the ocean and a lagoon, was virtually wiped off the face of the earth. Only a few trees and an occasional brick wall remained of this town of several thousand inhabitants. Just off the lagoon was a huge salt works where ponds of seawater were evaporated leaving behind sea salt. The plant was closed because the thousands of bodies deposited in the ponds had polluted the works.

Here, after driving around 150 miles of coastline, we turned inland and headed to the mountains. We arrived at the government-operated rest house at Ella where we enjoyed a nice dinner and retired early, being emotionally exhausted from the days drive.

**25 January 2005** – After breakfast we headed towards Kandy, a city in the highlands that we would pass through on our way to visit other UCF ministry sites in the interior. To get to Kandy we had to drive through about 100 miles of tea plantations. Narrow mountainous roads (with few guard rails) and massive road construction projects delayed our progress. As we were making our way down one mountain road we passed a young boy selling flowers. As we continued down to the next level, there was the same boy selling flowers. I said that if we passed him again we must stop and buy the flowers. Sure enough, as we drove around the bend and came along the next level, there was the same boy again selling flowers. So we stopped, haggled over the price, and bought the flowers. I figured that kid had been running down the mountain trying to sell us the flowers each time we passed. He earned his sale!



Pastor Haley's Wife, Binky, Greeting Children Victimized by the Tsunami

We decided to go as far as Kandy and stop for the night. As we traveled we discussed extensively ideas for projects that might best respond to the needs we observed the previous day. In Kandy after dinner we attended a cultural dance program that includes fire walking! It is a “must see” for visitors to Kandy.

**26 January 2005** – Traffic was so bad trying to get out of Kandy that after more than an hour we were still stuck. So we again changed our plans and headed back toward the coast. Some of our luggage had arrived and we wanted to collect it at the airport. Along the way we stopped for lunch at a restaurant in Pinnawella where we watched about 50 elephants from the Elephant Orphanage play in the river. We arrived at the airport mid-afternoon. It was quite an ordeal, but I finally managed to collect our luggage and clear it through customs. Three pieces had arrived, but the fourth was still missing. We returned to the Mount Lavinia Hotel to have dinner and prepare for the next day's ministry.

**27 January 2005** – After breakfast we were picked up for the short ride to the temporary location for the Moratuwa Beach Children's Project. The children greeted us with garlands of flowers. Then we went inside where they sang for us (in English) “Baa, baa, black sheep, have you any wool?” We presented school supplies from one of our church members to the workers. Next Binky presented Health Kits to the children. These were donated by members of the Littleton United Methodist Church and contained a toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, shampoo, washcloth, and a comb. We had taken 75 of these kits in our checked luggage. Next we were introduced to a man and his wife, their 15-year-old daughter and 13-year-old son. They also have a younger daughter in the nursery school. He previously had a fishing boat that was destroyed by the tsunami. Now he has been selected by Rev. Fernando's staff to be the recipient of a new boat. He told us the boat would create jobs for 10 men. He was very excited and kept gesturing toward heaven as though he were giving praise to God for the blessings of getting a replacement boat.

We then drove south to Kalutara and turned inland to visit the nursery school at Agalawatta. In the year since I was last there, the enrollment has doubled from 30 to 60 children. They need to expand their building to accommodate the children. What a great problem to have. Next we drove through an area of rubber plantations and lowland tea plantations to visit the nursery school and church at Neboda. I dedicated this building about 4 years ago. The pastor was away, but his wife told us they have about 10 converts awaiting baptism. This church is in a Tamil ethnic area where many of the people are Hindus. We returned to the coast and stopped for a late lunch at the Tangerine Bay Resort Hotel. As we came into the Coffee Shop by the beach, we noticed a crowd of people outside pointing to the sky. They were watching a perfectly beautiful waterspout moving about ½ mile offshore. We watched until it came ashore several miles north of us and dissipated. The staff told us that the tsunami had washed through the Coffee Shop breaking out the windows and trapping some hotel guests who had to be pulled to safety.

After lunch we returned to our hotel where we slept for several hours. We then packed and had a late dinner and left for the airport about 11 PM. We were required to be at the airport by midnight for our 3 AM departure.

Other than breaking a temporary crown over the Indian Ocean, our trip home was fairly uneventful. We enjoyed several hours in the airport at Dubai in The United Arab Emirates. We spent Friday afternoon and evening in Zurich, Switzerland, and returned to the US the next day.