



The **Methodist Church**



Bangladesh Bits

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Dear Friends

I've been promising to tell you for a while but have kept putting it off to tell you other interesting news, so finally, I'm sure you're dying to find out I will let you know how our wedding went - the inside story....

Firstly, thank you so much for your prayers for my dad, as against expectations due to his recent stroke the doctor gave him clearance to fly out to Bangladesh for the wedding along with my mum. That my sister Moira, brother-in-law Paul Fox and three friends Barbara, Emmanuel and Patrick were also able to come; really put the icing on the cake. So things started about a week earlier showing them around Dhaka: The anarchic driving particularly fascinated the boys (bad even by Londoners' standards), while the crowds everywhere, bright and colourful saris, as well as tasty spice laden food were other highlights. The chance to meet children whose schooling my family sponsors and the opportunity to visit the impressive work of the Church of Bangladesh Social Development Programme in the Dhaka slums lifting the most vulnerable out of poverty made a strong impact on them.

Just before the wedding in Bangladesh the equivalent of a stag/hen night is a *Gai Hollud*. However, my best man Paul Giacomini who works with SIL in Bangladesh, wouldn't let me escape so easily and organised a Western style Stag Night as well in which we went to a nice hotel with a swimming pool and a gym in which they endeavoured to get me fit in time for the wedding, after being 'forced' around all the weights and exercise machines I was ready for the sauna (we pointed out to the guests from London that it was actually just like monsoon weather in Bangladesh). Well whatever difference it did to my fitness the delicious meal at the hotel probably cancelled it out!

The night before the wedding is when the *Gai Hollud* is held. This tradition has its roots as a Hindu purification ritual but these days' all people of Muslim and Christian faiths, as well as of almost all ethnic communities in Bangladesh also celebrate *Gai Hollud* as an essential part of getting married and it is a time of great fun with friends and family. 'Hollud' is a Bengali word meaning 'yellow' so all the girls dress up in yellow or orange saris, the female close friends and relatives got ready together and paraded over to the venue where I was waiting. The venue which was the front garden of the Jennings family was beautifully decorated with painted patterns on the floor (of the drive), orange marigold flowers, thousands of fairy lights, as well as a white canopy and white chairs. Linda looked stunning as she was carried in by a strong cousin and placed on a low table with a

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backdrop of strings of marigolds and a display with our names on. It was not so easy when it came to carrying me out to the table; in fact the same cousin and two friends barely managed it! Nevertheless we both ended up seated on the table and the festivities could begin:

First off a prayer was said and then all 80-100 guests or so it seemed fed us spoonfuls of tasty misti (very sweet cakes), and bits of fruit, symbolic of the sweetness of marriage. Now I have a reputation for eating cakes and sweets, but even I started refusing the misti and asking for the fruit. The other aspect is that everyone takes great pleasure in smearing your faces with herb paste and turmeric paste, apparently also a symbol of blessing, though I was a little worried that on my pale skin the yellow turmeric might not come off (fortunately I didn't look too yellow and jaundiced for the wedding). There was also some waving of fire in front of our faces (symbolic of purification or perhaps the perils of marriage?) which would never be allowed for health and safety reasons in Britain, that became even more dangerous when John (CBSDP-Meherpur manager) took the fiery dish from Linda's mother and danced around with it. But in the end it was the sitting cross-legged for an hour that did me in, as my legs got cramp (it's a long time since sitting cross-legged for school assemblies). Besides Linda's relatives had started some traditional Santali tribal dances and I couldn't wait to join in! Basically you dance round in a circle with linked hands and footwork of varying complexities, two guys with big drums joined us as the women sang the haunting beautiful rhythmic melodies. Great fun too and following the dancing we all ate a meal.

Linda's sister Shipli putting turmeric paste on her face
(Photos this page: Barbara Kertai)



I arrived early at the church, probably the nicest one in Dhaka, in the walled compound in



the old part of the city with its whitewashed walls, turret, clock and bell built in 1819. As it had been the church for the British colonials and still sports plaques inside in memory of loved ones, I was probably not the first British man to walk up the aisle there, perhaps also not the first with a Bangladeshi bride? As the whole building had been refurbished the previous year it was already attractive but Barbara and Linda's friends had done a really lovely job decorating it the previous day and Austin had done a fantastic job with canopy, stage and seats in the churchyard, not to mention the mountains of biriani rice, chicken and goat meat cooking in huge cauldrons at the back.

Ably assisted in last minute preparations by my best man all that was needed was the bride, the Bishop looked more nervous than me as we waited and waited... until true to tradition the bride arrived late, a whole 45 minutes! As I said to John

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at the time, perhaps this is symbolic of all the waiting the husband will have to do in the future for his wife? However, it was truly worth the wait; Linda looked absolutely gorgeous in a red sari with gold patterning as she entered on the arm of her father with her little sisters as bridesmaids. The service was really special, conducted using the Church of North India (English language) liturgy by Bishop Michael Baroi with a mixture of at least 3 cultures possibly 5: We had songs in English, Santali, and Bengali languages, plus an American Black Gospel number sung by Emmanuel. Bishop Baroi married us while Linda's minister Pastor Asa Kain of Assemblies of God Church delivered the sermon. As well as exchanging rings, we exchanged garlands of flowers and together lit one candle from two. Truly magical; moments we will remember for ever.



Linda throwing her flowers to the girls to fight over, they all ended up with a few flowers each so who knows who will marry next!
(Photo: David Hall)

After pausing for photographs we moved down the aisle to the door, getting out to the dining area to cut the cake was not however straightforward. It seems in Bangladesh there is a tradition of relatives/friends forming a 'gate', now this is not a nice gate you can walk through as in the children's song 'oranges and lemons', rather it is a human wall holding a ribbon

more akin to something off a rugby pitch. Things were complicated as there are apparently differing traditions across the country and everyone wanted to get in on the act, so there were two gates! The aim of those in the wall is to prevent you from passing and to extort money (something to do with compensation for taking their relative away-or so they say), your aim with your friends is to break through. As I had 6 foot 3 inch Paul and some other rather big guys on my side we decided to use all our strength and managed to push through both walls, great fun, only to realise once I was through that I'd left Linda behind in the clutches of a big overenthusiastic lady from Central office – oops.....

After eventually securing her release, we cut the cake (the photo was taken in the nick of time as shortly after it collapsed) and sat on the stage. We had a superb dancing group (sisters of the church receptionist) who put on a great display to the latest Bangladeshi and Bollywood songs, not content with that they grabbed our friends, and it wasn't long until a whole crowd was dancing at the front – just like in the movies (the Indian ones), while others ate. We paused for me to lift Linda up to pop balloons at the entrance, and she tossed her flowers, before getting in a car beautifully decorated with strings of tiny white flowers, marigolds and red roses (– a bit more sophisticated than cans on the bumper), and headed off into the sunset, well in truth the traffic jams of Dhaka to our hotel after a fantastic day, then on the following afternoon after a 6 hour airport delay to a great honeymoon in Goa, India (where there really were nice sunsets). Thank you all for your best wishes, prayers, presents and support in various ways, we wish you all could have been there with the 273 guests that turned up (apparently a small wedding by Bangladeshi standards), and will show more photos to many of you when we come to the UK in May.

We are now in Rajshahi as my room in Meherpur was not deemed suitable for a couple, it took a while to organise, but we have now moved all our stuff into a nice flat and are busy getting involved with the CBSDP at a new location, note the change in address. I am

particularly getting involved around the issue of climate change and a review of the programmes in the district, while Linda is getting involved in working to introduce multi-lingual education in the CBSDP run schools, she also hopes to help with Sunday School at our local church here. Although I've moved I do plan to continue to stay involved with CBSDP-Meherpur and visit regularly to continue my input into the Arsenic Project. I will also stay involved in the Women & Child Trafficking Prevention Project which has been expanded and is now running at all CBSDP offices.

Thank God...

- For my marriage to Dipty Linda! And that the ceremonies went really well and were really enjoyable
- That my father was well enough to attend our wedding
- That we have been able to move into a nice flat in Rajshahi

Please pray...

- Please pray for the complete recovery of my Father's sight after a recent stroke, as since the wedding it has deteriorated a little
- Pray that the Lord would keep watch on Linda's mum who has been quite sick lately, pray she makes a full recovery and Linda has God's peace.
- That God would guide James in developing the Climate Change Programme of the CBSDP
- That Linda would settle into the CBSDP, and be able to have positive impact on it's work
- God would bless our attempts to introduce MLE into Rajshahi schools.
- Please continue to pray that the successful conclusion on the court case allows some kind of emotional closure for Sabina as well, as well as for God to continue to heal and to bless her as she rebuilds her life.
- Pray that the President and advisors will have the wisdom and ability to ensure peaceful and fair elections and that political stability and Godly leadership in Bangladesh would result.
- Pray that the effects of the Stop the Traffik networks in the UK, Bangladesh and elsewhere would be successful.
- Also, pray for our colleagues in the CBSDP, that God would supply his wisdom and blessing to their life and work.
- That I would have time and motivation to improve my Bengali language skills
- That we will be able to wisely develop the arsenic mitigation project.
- That the love of God would really touch the hearts of the men, women & girls we are working with and that we would be effective in our activities to uplift them.

James & Linda