

The Methodist Church



James (& Linda) Pender, Mission Partners, Bangladesh, November 07

Dear Friends

Just one week before my wedding, I've naturally been doing a fair bit of reflecting. It is amazing how time flies, I have now been back in Bangladesh one year since my time speaking on the work of the CBSDP in the UK, which means an accumulated 3 years in total spent in Meherpur! What I have been doing here I would never have dreamed of if you had asked me as a child: "What will you do when you grow up"? Let alone marrying a beautiful Bangladeshi bride!



Three years is actually the longest I have spent in any job, I am beginning to see the benefit of staying put and glad I turned down the chance of short-term consultancy work. For after a while instead of working with colleagues you are working with friends, you really understand the situation/organisation, can get by in the local language and are in other words in an optimum position to contribute. Nowhere is this so true than in the area of Arsenic Mitigation.

The CBSDP's work in arsenic mitigation was already well established when I arrived with thousands of tubewells tested, arsenic-safe shallow modified dugwells installed and vitamins given to victims of arsenic poisoning. When I arrived I had barely heard of the arsenic crisis at all, a fact that I found staggering considering in this country alone at least 29 million are currently at risk from arsenic dissolved in the groundwater which is harvested by millions of shallow pump tubewells. I visited badly affected villages and was gutted to hear firsthand from wives who had lost husbands, fathers who had lost children and many many who had lost dear friends. Right away I knew it had to be my main priority during my time in Meherpur and time wise that has been so.

Firstly I discovered my colleagues were poorly resourced with little up-to-date information on the arsenic problem, so much of my first year was made making contacts and collecting information from hundreds of sources, eventually resulting in a report summarising the current situation of arsenic in Bangladesh and a second report summarising what was known about the situation in Meherpur District. With my colleagues Provonjan, Charles and David, I also discussed how we could improve our



Installing a *Chuli* Water Purifier into a wood cooking stove

impact, so we have tried: Innovative 'chuli' water filters which pasteurise dugwell water (through a metal coil imbedded in a clay cooking stove); mapping the arsenic at a village level to better site new arsenic safe wells; using better arsenic test kits; a stronger focus on using nutrition as a route to recovery from poisoning (through kitchen gardens, soya bean cultivation and eating of lentils); and raising of awareness of the risk to health through rice cultivated with arsenic contaminated water.

Understandably arsenic contamination of water is a complicated problem and it has taken time to develop our response. So it was a great delight to me, a real highlight of my work when this year we installed 6 deep-tubewells (320ft), that go beneath the arsenic containing groundwater layer, in 5 villages where we had recently tested wells and mapped the pattern of arsenic distribution. At a time when there is reducing interest from big donors and governments it was fantastic to have money to do all this as a result of donations and collections from churches and other groups in the UK following my talks there last year. Thanks to the many of you reading this who made it all possible!



It was an interesting process as a rig was set up and two men turned a giant corkscrew like apparatus for 3 days, while at the same time another fellow pumped water down to loosen the soil. As they manually drilled in shifts, they sung work songs to keep up their energy and spirits. When they pulled out the drilling pipe sections they all swung on the rope shouting. A tremendous effort! But best of all is that communities in these 5 badly affected villages of Theraghoria, Bhollobhpur, Rotonpur, Anondobas and Kamdevpur can drink bacteriologically and arsenic safe water from these wells (each providing for 50-100 families), no longer will they become sick from consuming life's most precious commodity – water!

However, while this year marks my three years of work in Bangladesh, this year is very special for the church here as it marks its' 25 years of work to serve the poor: the Silver Jubilee of the Church of Bangladesh Social Development Programme. As a result we have had a host of celebrations in all the places we are working culminating in a combined celebration with our donors, partners and church links in Dhaka last week, with a great theme: 'Serving humanity is worshipping God'. I helped CBSDP-Meherpur manager Provonjan with his talk and thought you might be interested in what we wrote too, it follows below:

Jubilee was celebrated in Old Testament times every 7 and 50 years it was a time when slaves were released, sold land was returned to its original owners, debts were cancelled and it was a time when the land was left fallow. It was also a time of celebration.

In Luke 4 verses 17-19 Jesus said "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor; He has sent me to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim liberation to the captives and to recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed. To proclaim the year of the Lords favour". In other words Jesus was declaring a period of jubilee.

In our development work we are very much trying to follow in Jesus' footsteps and proclaim jubilee in the areas in which we work in Bangladesh. Healing the broken hearted through marriage reconciliation, rehabilitation of trafficked women in our Tailoring course and in discouraging dowry; proclaiming freedom to those who are captives of poverty, through vocational training and microcredit; helping to bring recovery of sight and the treatment of other illnesses through our hospitals and health programme; and setting free the oppressed through advocacy, empowerment and legal support.

Therefore to celebrate a 25-year jubilee of our work in development has double meaning!

It was in 1971 when the Church of Bangladesh began the ministry of service to the poor, the very year of its establishment. For when the church leaders looked to where its priorities should lay the poverty of the country and its members was 'staring it in the face'. Bangladesh at that time had just won a costly war of independence in which three million were killed, countless injured, rape of women was systematic, property destroyed and assets lost. There was so much physical, emotional and spiritual need in the country. The Church responded through the channelling of aid such as; food, medicine and clothes and in the process of rebuilding communities.

Once the country has got itself on its feet needs changed and there was a need for a more long-term approach to assistance. Therefore in 1982 the Church of Bangladesh Social Development Programme concentrated on: Educating children and adults (which was especially needed as the Pakistani occupiers had routinely killed teachers and educators); social forestry; sanitation; primary health care; and organising groups (of mainly women) for mutual support, as well as learning.

In 1994 Church of Bangladesh started its successful Microcredit Programme, for with its giving of small loans at low interest, poor families could be 'helped to help themselves'. Numerous businesses and concerns were set up by women who may have previously lacked money, but had no shortage of enterprising ideas: Milk production, poultry rearing, basket making, small shops, rickshaw/van transport, land leasing for crop or tree cultivation, the hiring out of welding or other equipment, restaurants, tailoring..... the list is endless. Grameen Bank's Mohammed Yunus was last year honoured with a Nobel Prize for the original development of the highly successful microcredit concept and it has served CBSDP's beneficiaries as well as it has served Grameen's.

But microcredit has its limitations so in the last few years CBSDP has been seeking to expand its portfolio of interventions to assist particularly vulnerable groups of people. This has led to its pioneering Women and Child Trafficking Prevention Project, Arsenic Mitigation Project, HIV/AIDS Project, Climate Change Project, as well as new emphasis community participation and on rights based and advocacy approaches to work.

CBSDP has a lot to celebrate, as well as an exciting horizon of new possibilities to live out the concept of bringing Christ's jubilee to communities. However, while we are celebrating here, the happiest are those whose lives have been transformed, the communities and individuals with which we work. That is why it was so appropriate

that our main celebrations occurred at village, sub-district and district level involving as many of the local people we have worked with as possible. Here the celebrations reached fever pitch!

Thank God...

- For my marriage to Dipty Linda! And that the ceremonies went really well and were really enjoyable (will write more about it soon).
- For 25 years of exceptional service to the poor by the Church of Bangladesh.
- That we have a nice flat that we will move into shortly after we have got it ready.

Please pray...

- Please pray for relief efforts to the victims of Cyclone Sidr. CBSDP is involved in aid and rehabilitation work with those affected.
- Please pray for the complete recovery of my Father's sight after a recent stroke, but thank God he was able to attend my wedding.
- That God would guide us in developing a role for Linda within the CBSDP, as she will work alongside me in the development work.
- Pray that the President and advisors will have the wisdom and ability to ensure peaceful and fair elections, especially in the light of recent student riots around the country.
- Pray that the effects of the Stop the Traffik networks in the UK, Bangladesh and elsewhere would be successful.
- That Sabina would receive justice and would obtain compensation from her traffickers
- 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 Pender in Bengali script)