



The **Methodist** Church



Anglicans in
World Mission



Bangladesh Bits

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Dear Friends

Recently I spent 10 days travelling round the south-western part of Bangladesh: Faridpur, Barisal, Gopalganj, Khulna and then Bagerhat Districts were visited.

At my first stop at Bodarpur village accompanied by the local manager Dulal I spoke to a smiling farmer Hossain Mullah; I sat outside his simple home while he sent a boy to shin up a coconut tree to bring down some fresh young coconuts so we could drink the refreshing juice inside (closer in taste to lemon juice than the milky contents of the ripe coconuts we are familiar with in the UK), in the background fresh shoots in the rice paddies glowed an improbable shade of luminous green.

But his smile belayed worries within and in this rural ideal not was all it appeared. Hossain whose wife Hafeza is a member of one of CBSDP's women's Development Groups (her group has the name *Mou* which



Boy climbing a coconut palm

means 'sunbird') is reliant on rainwater to irrigate his rice fields. However, this year the rain was insufficient to grow rice as usual in the monsoon, yet last year terrible floods from too much rain destroyed his rice crops. Too much rain when he doesn't want it and not enough rain when he needs it... "All the farmers will die" he dramatically proclaimed and it isn't just rice: His *dondol* a type of gourd was no longer producing vegetables, while his mango trees around his home hadn't produced fruit for four years due to changing weather. "It wasn't always like this, he informed us; 10 years ago the seasons were regular and predictable and farming was better".

I asked him why he thought the seasons could no longer be relied upon? He answered: "For us farmers we know that less rain or too much rain is coming and that it is a problem, but we cannot say why – only Allah (God) knows". Unfortunately I am not in the same position as him; I am not ignorant as to why, for I know that the predictions concerning climate changes are exactly what he is describing. God through giving talent and ability to scientists around the world has provided us with knowledge but I am also aware that due to our excessively greedy western lifestyles we have put him in that position, which left me feeling very uncomfortable.

As I headed further south near the sleepy village of Jobarpar in Barisal District with its ever flowing river and ponds almost everywhere you look only to find the same story. Taking opportunity from a break in the heavy monsoon rain, as the sun came up I went for a walk down the slippery mud road behind the church compound. People are very sociable and one lady named Hanol that I met got chatting to me and invited me to her house for a cup of tea, her neighbour Sudir with typical Bengali generosity ran out to buy a packet of biscuits. Sudir had three children and his two girls were named *Bristi* (Rain) and *Bonna* (Flood) an ironic comment on his circumstances for like Hossain, Sudir had suffered from a lack of rainfall for his 'pre-monsoon' rice crop (in this area farmers have 2 seasons in which they cultivate rice) and got a poor harvest – less than half of last year's – a real kick in the teeth for a smallholder like himself, yet in previous years he has suffered devastating floods. My encounter left me reflecting that whether Christians like Sudir and Hanol or Muslims like Hossain and Hafeza climate change is no respecter of persons it hits all.



Participants 'seasonal mapping at the workshop

I had actually come to Jobarpar to conduct a workshop with help from the manager John Provanjan and Krishna a local CBSDP worker who recently received training on climate change issues from Tearfund's Bangladesh office (she gave a short overview on climate change after the first two exercises). But the purpose of the workshop was to actually listen to the local people before deciding how we could help them adapt to climate change. It was an all day affair and with a typically rural Bangladeshi late

start we got going with pleasantries from CBSDP's Coordinator David Mazumder and quickly moved on to participatory exercises in small groups: Firstly getting them to draw a *Seasonal Calendar* (a table with month across the top and crops/illness/weather down the side), they marked a line for when for example rain used to come, or rice used to be cultivated under the months and then a second line underneath showing the current situation; secondly they drew an *Timeline* for a ten year period marking when various disaster had struck; thirdly they used a format (another table) to examine the impacts of climate change and closely associated environmental degradation and disasters on CBSDP's existing work and what could be done about it; and finally a discussion on how could all the different groups (ie youth, women, clergy, schools) within the Church of Bangladesh could get involved in addressing climate change issues.

The results were very worrying with the times for planting all kinds of crops from rice, to jute to vegetables significantly shifted (1, 1.5 and 2 months forward respectively) in response to changing seasonal weather patterns, with new issues being a lack of wild fish in the rivers, and declines in bird and turtles in recent years.

My next stop was another couple of villages a further 6 hours drive to the south-west near the port town of Mongla (just south of the city of Khulna), as these villages had been hit by Cyclone Aila earlier in the year we had half a dozen boxes of new clothing (no-longer needed samples) donated by a textile company in Dhaka where one of Linda's friends works. As our journey coincided with a local bus strike, with John & I having to negotiate our way through 7 add-hoc picket lines/roadblocks manned with menacing club & brick wielding youths, the news that we had 'aid to deliver to cyclone hit villages' helped get us through.



Crossing the Gorai River

After a ferry across a large Gorai river, it was a long rickshaw ride before we reached the small village of Kanainagor, it was a scenic with a lovely view across the fields to the river on our right and beyond to the far bank covered by the thick jungle of the Sundabans Forest – the largest mangrove forest in the world with its crocodiles, river

dolphins and royal Bengal Tigers. They remained hidden in the tangle of leaves and branches but I did find a Blue-eared Kingfisher which only occurs around mangroves.

To a watchful eye the most unusual thing was the absence of any rice paddy, vegetables or fruit orchards. The increasingly heavy rain masked the reality that the biggest problem in these communities is in fact water! All was well until Cyclone Sidr in 1998 and Cyclone Aila early this year struck these communities, homes were damaged, property lost and people killed but it was the storm surges that drove a wall of water inland that left the most permanent legacy – salt! Fields are now so saline (salty) that crops will not grow, the only farming that is now occurring is for fish/shrimps in flooded fields, while the only plant being cultivated is *golpatta* a low value small palm-like plant with big leaves which are used for roofing simple boats, huts and homes.

The Church of Bangladesh hostel at Sellagonia nearby with its large open concrete tank, provided water for many immediately following the disasters (but even that was left slightly salty) and 3000 took refuge there when their homes were destroyed. A church member 70 year old Ashalotta Baroi has never seen a situation like this before where the fields have become so salty despite living here all her life, while Abdul one of those who took shelter in the hostel and who has a small shop said: “In a while the salt will go from our fields, the situation will return to normal and everything will be beautiful again”. Sadly an increase in global temperatures will lead to more devastating storms like cyclones Sidr and Aila and while the salt may reduce in the short term the likelihood of more salty water submerging fields from further storm surges from future cyclones, as well as from sea level rise and lower freshwater river flows in the dry season will lead to the situation getting worse not better.

There are so many ways to assist the poor, but in Kanainagor I felt very helpless for to be honest I cannot see a future for St. James’ Church and the 35 families that make up its congregation. In 50 years time perhaps the village will be under the sea or at least uninhabitable. Probably the only option is to make them aware of the situation they face and give them skills to go and find a job elsewhere, as well as to enable them to harvest rainwater so they can at least have freshwater to drink. The frightening thing is that there are millions of people in the coastal belt just like them.

During a time of discussion with the church members of St. James’ I was told: “We don’t know what we will do know, in the river there are no fish, on our trees we have no fruit and in our fields we have no crops”. In 1 Corrinthians chapter 12 verses 26-27 St. Paul writes to the church: ‘If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it... All of you are Christ's body, and each one is a part of it’.

As we are all part of the one human family we should feel pain with the people of Sonagonia and Kanainagor, as negotiations on a new international treaty on Climate Change have started, please let us pray, lobby elected representatives and act in to reduce the impact on the earth from our daily lives, to prevent an increase in suffering.

Access Tearfund, Operation Noah or Climate Stewards websites or if no computer call them to find out how you can make a difference and to receive resources!

How to Take Action on Climate Change...

- Tearfunds Climate Change Campaign: Tel: 0845 355 8355 or <http://www.tearfund.org/Campaigning/Climate+change+and+disasters/>
- British Churches Together Campaign – ‘Operation Noah’: Tel: Landline: 020 7324 4761 or 020 7324 4769 Mobile: 07968 131 639 or <http://www.operationnoah.org/home>
- Climate Stewards of A Rocha, *Christians in Conservation*: Tel: 020 8574 5935 or <http://www.climatestewards.net/cs-int-en/resources/extras/climateinfoaction.html>

Thank God...

- Safe travel as we conducted Evaluation Review Meetings throughout the country
- A productive time at the Micah Network Consultation in Kenya

Please pray...

- That the Copenhagen Conference would lead to a serious treaty on the reduction of greenhouse gases and funding to tackle the effects of climate change
- God would guide Linda and our colleagues as they prepare materials and teachers for the introduction of MLE into Rajshahi schools next year.
- For wisdom for James & David Hall as they help to guide the implementation of recommendations from the CBSDP External Evaluation Report.
- For James as he meets the Conservative Party Shadow Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change when he visits Bangladesh to look at Climate Change
- Rt. Rev. Michael Baroi for God’s blessing as he retires as Bishop of Dhaka
- Rt. Rev. Sunil Mankhin the new Bishop of Kushtia for anointing & wisdom.
- 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 is quite frail in good health and that Linda has God’s peace.
- That God would protect Linda’s father and neighbours (who are vulnerable being tribal & Christian minorities) as recently some criminals tried to seize some of his farmland by force, beating and hospitalising one of his neighbours.
- That the Alpha Course in Rajshahi would be restarted.
- That God would guide James as he helps write a new Climate Change Project proposal for Jobarpar Deanery in southern Bangladesh.
- That we will be able to wisely develop the arsenic mitigation project.
- That James would have time and motivation to improve his Bengali and Linda her English language skills
- Also, pray for our colleagues in the CBSDP, that God would supply his wisdom and blessing to their life and work.
- That the love of God would really touch the hearts of the men, women & children we are working with and that we would be effective in our activities to uplift them.

James & Linda