

MISSION PARTNER NEWSLETTER FROM SRI LANKA: JUNE 2009

We can thank God that the war between the Government and the LTTE is now over. Of course, the cost has been enormous. We will probably never know the true number of dead and injured, and we may never know the details of how the war was fought. What is certain is that the President was hugely successful in focussing the majority onto the prospect of victory, in supplying the military with young men and women and their weapons, and keeping the rest of the world at bay right up to the end. Prabhakaran and his cohorts are all now dead or flown. In his victory speech, the President said that the government's victory is as great an achievement as the gaining of Independence in 1948. To the extent that Independence was a struggle against oppression, his assertion is probably true. But independence was also the start of a new nation based on a constitution which attempted to protect the minorities. We have a new situation now in the political landscape – one that needs an utterly inclusive mindset that differs profoundly from the attitudes and postures of a country at war. Is this government able to make the adjustments needed?

While we wait to see, there are huge numbers, maybe as many as 300,000, internally displaced persons (IDPs) in camps in the north. They are waiting to be screened and resettled. NGOs have been very keen to help in the camps but are reluctant to provide the sort of help that might lead to a permanent settlement. The people definitely need to get back to their own homes. Some may have been displaced several times, the first time more than twenty years ago. Where is home if you brought up your children in the place you were moved to? And what about the paperwork? Can you prove that you lived in that village, in that house or in a house on that bit of land? And what about those 100,000 Muslims ejected overnight from Jaffna by the LTTE in 1990? Are they going to be helped to go back? The humanitarian and administrative tasks are massive and need great sensitivity and fairness in addition to the obvious resources.

Funding will be a major problem. The government itself has no spare sources of money. Ninety percent of its revenue is spent servicing debt. Government debt per person (man, woman and child) is about the same as the average annual salary. It's no wonder that a populist government that prides itself on defying the West is struggling to agree terms on a huge (\$2bn) IMF loan. The Government's spending is too much for the country to bear. Even if you ignore the overwhelming security presence, overstaffing is rampant – visit any government office and you'll see lots of people sitting at desks doing very little. (But on the other hand there is no social security for the unemployed.) An astrologer who predicted major economic problems for the government later this year has been detained for ninety days! His misfortune is to be an astrologer. Such people are widely believed here, even the President consults them. Had he been an economist he would have been OK – no-one listens to them!

There is no doubt that the media is cowed. In that same victory speech the President said there are two types of Sri Lankans, those who love their country and those who do not. At the time it was prudent to hang out the flags whatever your thought. Criticism of the government is seen by many as being unpatriotic. Some politicians even want to save the costs of another election and make Mahinda Rajapaksa President for life. We've mentioned how brave many journalists are – they continue to be so even as circumstances become less and less favourable. Tissainayagam has been in detention for nearly 18 months without charge. You only have to look at the international friends the government is making to wonder about the way the wind is blowing: Iran, Libya, Myanmar (Burma)...

It was perhaps fortunate that the high emotion of the end of the war took place while the students were away on their long vacation fieldwork and vacation. The college itself didn't fly any flags because some of its students have lost family members, or have family members in the camps. How can one part of the community celebrate when others are so sad and anxious? Early in the morning of National Day (Feb. 4th) the student leader every year raises the flag before anyone can to make a fuss (one way or another). The flag itself is contentious, (see our website). The question, "How can the Christian community express a love of Sri Lanka?" is an urgent one which is difficult to answer when we are the only religious community that includes both ethnic groups, and when disagreeing with the government is considered unpatriotic. Christians are seen by many as sympathetic to the now vanquished LTTE and therefore suspect. The churches fear a wave of Sinhalese chauvinism that may focus on them. The anti-conversion bill that has been rumbling around in the background for at least four years, and which seeks to address genuine issues that the mainline churches accept, is still very much on the agenda. However, it is legalistic overkill and could be used by some to harm people they don't like.



Rosemary and David Furnival with a Hindu Swami at his Kovil in Muttur near Trincomalee

The last academic year ended at Holy Week. Since then the new batch of thirteen students had its four week orientation programme while existing students did their long vacation fieldwork in various places around the country. Our short newsletter in May covered this period

as well as those who left in April/May. We visited a group of students in Muttur, a small town across the harbour from Trincomalee and also met up with our Mission Partner colleague, David Furnival, who is posted there. .



The Lawrence Family on the ramparts of Galle Fort

After Easter, we visited the attractive southern town of Galle with Lawrence and Malar, mission partners from India, and their two children, Felix and Felicita. Their contract at TCL has ended now and they will be leaving TCL soon. They are hoping to have a furlough in Britain. They have been invaluable to the college, taking on all sorts of responsibilities, and have been good friends to us.

Now the new academic year has begun – divided into two semesters instead of three terms – and it's all systems go. Rosemary is teaching two BTh courses and one BD course, fortunately all NT courses. She also has various new duties as organiser of the Counselling and Group Work course, organiser of a theological conference and co-editor of the Sri Lankan Journal of Theological Reflection. She continues as Faculty Secretary. Her Nursery and Basil Jackson Theological Society duties have gone to others. Meanwhile James continues teaching English and computing and maintaining the computers. He has also been very busy working for the college's Development Group for whom he wrote an "Issues and Aspirations" report to describe where the college is and where its stakeholders want it to go to. This involved surveying former students, and interviews with Heads of Churches, other college governors, Faculty members, students, alumni and others. It was fascinating for James and led to a deeper understanding of the college and what it means to everyone. The next stage will investigate options to address the issues and meet the aspirations.

The long vacation was also the occasion for two students from the college to visit Kent as guests of the Parish of Goudhurst Sri Lanka Church Association. Harshana and Indradevi stayed for a month and had many fascinating experiences. They made a real impact with their hosts and have helped revitalise the twenty three year old link which is so important to the college. We were pleased to help them get their visas and also to prepare them for their visit.

Meanwhile Rosemary made a short visit to England to see her parents in Watford. Her mother was very ill in Jan / Feb so Rosemary was very pleased to find Marjorie in better health and good spirits. She also saw her siblings and their families. And she was delighted to surprise

Harshana and Indradevi in St. Paul's Cathedral – they had no idea she was in the country. James stayed in Sri Lanka and continued his work for the Development Group.



Harshana and Indradevi on Westminster Bridge in London

Rosemary continues to sing in a local choir and took part in a concert at the Russian Cultural Centre in Colombo. On the same day we welcomed Rev'd Nick Thompson, a friend and former Reading colleague, and his daughter, Laura. They were visiting the country for a few days in the latter stages of Nick's sabbatical en route back to England from Australia. We enjoyed their company very much.

Newsletter back copies are on our website together with a large number of pictures of our life in Sri Lanka: see www.rosemaryandjames.methodistchurch.co.uk. Our postal address is: The Theological College of Lanka, Nandana Uyana, Pilimalalawa 20450, Sri Lanka.

We ask for prayers/thoughts for all the issues and people mentioned in this newsletter.

- ⇒ For wisdom and magnanimity in government after their victory;
- ⇒ For those on both sides who died in the war, their grieving families, and all those in the IDP camps.
- ⇒ For the brave journalists & lawyers who uphold media freedom, especially Tissainayagam, still on remand;
- ⇒ For our college community as the academic term starts in a new post war situation;
- ⇒ The new students who have just begun at TCL;
- ⇒ For our TCL mission partner colleague, Maggie Mudalige, and her family on the death of her mother, Mrs. Mary Julian, a missionary in SL for 35 years.
- ⇒ For Lawrence and Malar, Felix and Felicita, as they leave TCL and await their next postings.



The Fletcher clan gather in St. Albans on Saturday May 23rd 2009