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Helping in the Flood



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BUTTRY



SUPPORT PLEDGED



GLOBAL

When Hurricane Harvey hit Texas I was on the other side of the world doing conflict transformation training in Sri Lanka, a country that had been torn by a 26-year long civil war. I was so proud that my daughter Janelle headed down to Austin, Texas where her brother lives to assist in the hurricane relief. She brought supplies down from Michigan and then helped sort and organize the supplies as they would be taken down to the stricken coastal areas near Houston.

As Janelle was helping with the storm and flood relief I found myself caught up in a similar effort in Sri Lanka. On my last full day here I visited the Baptist Church of Agalawatta. Agalawatta is an interior rural community that was hit by a flood as the river in town overflowed its banks. The homes of many families along the river were completely washed away. The Sri Lankan Baptist Sangamaya (Community) organized relief efforts through the local Baptist church. They got assistance from the relief arm of the Asia Pacific Baptist Federation.

My host was Rev. Heshan de Silva, recently installed President of the Baptist Sangamaya (similar to our General Secretary) and a graduate of our 10-day Training of Conflict Transformation Trainers in the Philippines in 2016. Heshan invited me to lead conflict transformation trainings throughout Sri Lanka in a 4-week visit. But then at the end of the trip he invited me to join in the flood relief effort in Agalawatta.

Led by their woman pastor, Rev. Ranjani, the Baptist congregation put on a smooth event to distribute the supplies. The Sri Lankan Baptists had put together complete kitchen kits for each of 120 flood-stricken families. The kits included a one-burner cookstove, a canister of gas, cooking pots, dishes, cups, utensils, and storage containers—everything needed to set up a kitchen. Also they had packets for each school child including a backpack, school supplies, uniforms, and shoes. The smiles on the faces of the children and parents as they received the supplies said it all!

My biggest surprise however was the educational event before the distribution. The families crowded into the church, spilling out into the yard for a special educational presentation. Thalal is a Baptist layman who works for the United Nations' REDD program (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation). Thalal gave a presentation about climate change and how it has increased the severity and frequency of natural disasters like the flood that hit Agalawatta. The pace of climate change is far more rapid than previous shifts in the climate because of accelerating human impact on the environment. One result in Sri Lanka is excessive rains in some parts of the country and drought in other parts. Farming practices carried out for millennia now are part of the problem or need to be dramatically altered to adjust to the new ecological realities. Thalal gave practical advice to the families about things they could do to not just survive this crisis but help turn the direction of ecological degradation.

As I watched Thalal's presentation I was struck by the difference of relief in Sri Lanka and relief in the U.S. The Sri Lankan Baptists were addressing both the immediate needs related to the disaster but also the underlying problems related to human behavior related to the environment. Meanwhile in the U.S. we were seeing the typical sacrificial and communal mobilization to respond to the crisis, but there was also intense debate about whether to even mention climate change having any impact on the extreme hurricanes in the Gulf areas while many western states were burning. Such concern was too political or controversial, especially at such a crisis time. Yet stewardship of the earth is a creation mandate, one we have from the very first chapters of the Bible. Is our relief in the U.S. too superficial? Do we give aid with one hand while with the other we stir up the storms through our greed and

self-centeredness that refuse to look at lifestyle and economic decisions that impact our planet? Maybe we have something to learn from the Sri Lankan Baptists about holistic relief. Maybe we need to sit at the feet of our brothers and sisters at the Baptist Church in Agalawatta and learn how these things should be done!

In peace and hope,

Dan