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ASIA LINK MAGAZINE

SRI LANKA

Magazine

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Mobilising the Sri Lankan church for mission.

Real stories of God's powerful work across Asia.
2023 Issue 4

EDITORIAL

After a busy summer of short-term teams and exhibition stands, we turn our focus to the island nation of Sri Lanka. The history of the church here is an unusual one, not simply because of the influence of various colonising powers, but also because of a recent growth in missionary zeal. We are encouraged that the church is starting to become a sending church, despite the many challenges faced on the island itself.

As you receive this issue, our staff are preparing for another term of speaking at churches, raising awareness of gospel needs in Asia and sharing wonderful stories of the ways your support is being used to spread the gospel. God is doing amazing things in Asia, and we are delighted that you are joining us on this journey! ■



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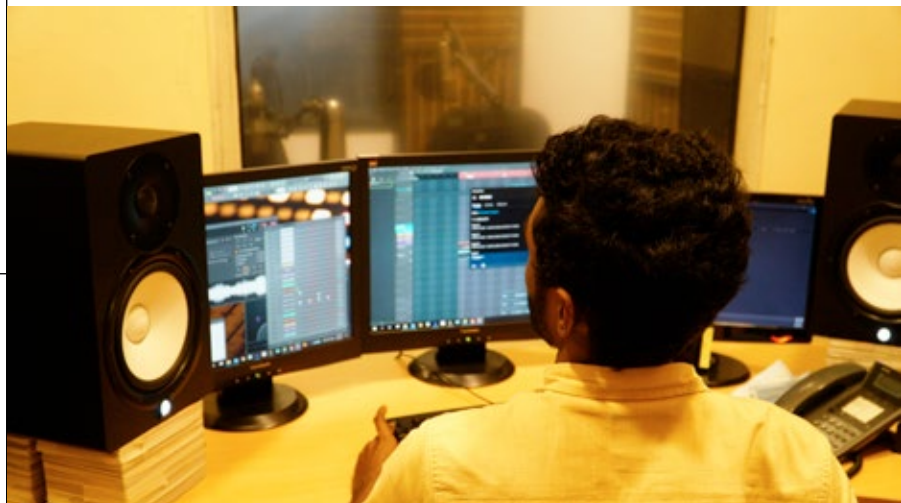
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The Land of Resplendence

Grace for a broken nation.



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COVER IMAGE

Girl in Kudawa, Sri Lanka

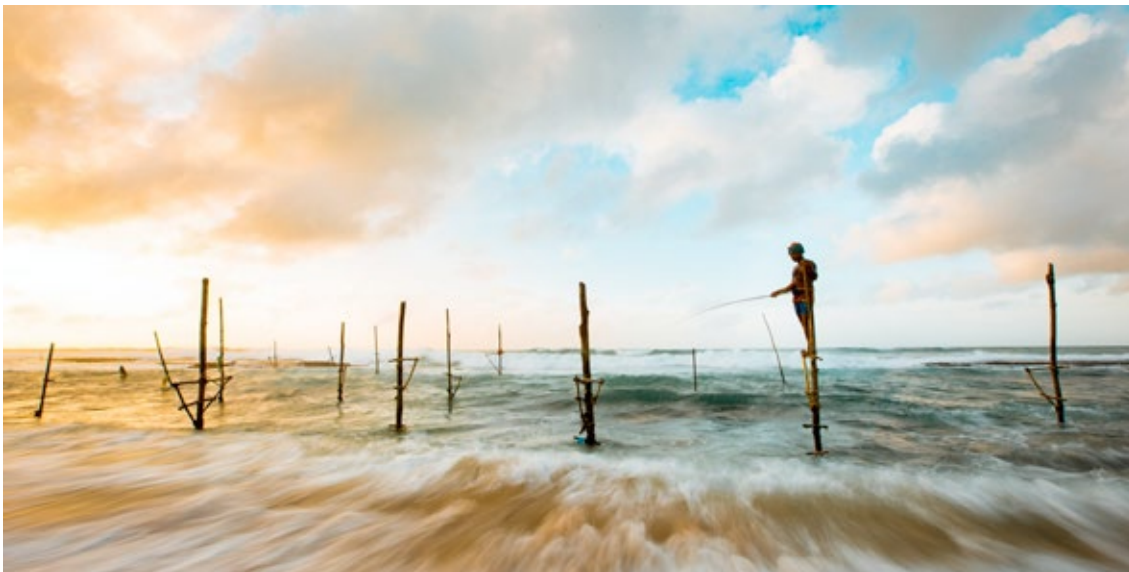
The town is a popular tourist resort with people coming from all over the world to camp out on the local beaches.



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SRI LANKA

THE LAND OF RESPLENDENCE

Grace for a broken nation.



Resplendence seems a long way off, but what we are seeing in Sri Lanka is the first green shoots of change. By God's grace, the church is growing and the gospel is being proclaimed.

What is God's vision for Sri Lanka? Of course, we cannot say with any certainty. However, the country's name translates literally as 'resplendent island', and it is not hard to find beauty here. Golden beaches, tea plantations and stunning mountains all paint a picture of the glory and majesty of the Creator.

However, there is much about the country which remains far from resplendent. The nation is famed for its brutal civil war which saw 25 years of conflict between the Sinhalese-dominated government and the Tamil Tigers, each side representing one of the island's two main people groups. In the midst of the fighting, the Asian tsunami of 2004 killed 30,000 people, only adding to the country's woes.

The war only ended in 2009, with the Sri Lankan military defeating the Tamil Tigers and bringing the illusion of peace. Beneath the surface, tensions and division remain, and the economic crisis of 2022 saw power cuts and fuel shortages bring the country to a standstill. Whilst the fighting may have ceased, can we really say that this is God's best for the 'resplendent island'?

Resplendence seems a long way off, but what we are seeing in Sri Lanka is the first green shoots of change. By God's grace, the church is growing and the gospel is being proclaimed. Our partners are producing teaching materials in both the Sinhala and Tamil languages, proclaiming Jesus through printed resources alongside radio and TV broadcasts. Meanwhile, an exciting movement among young people is seeing the church grow a missionary focus for the very first time, sending willing servants out across the nation and beyond.

Sri Lanka is a nation awaiting true resplendence, and the gospel of Jesus Christ is the only means by which it will know perfect beauty, glory and peace. ■

BIBLE ON THE BOX

Broadcasting the gospel across the nation.





Sri Lanka is home to 15 million Buddhists, accounting for 70% of the population.

We peer over the shoulders of a small team of sound engineers and video editors, all busy producing gospel media which will be broadcast all over Sri Lanka. As we tour the studios, the Director of the ministry explains, *“Our vision is to serve the people of Sri Lanka by helping to build up a Bible-believing, Scripture-centred community of faith, through a series of ministries and services, using media and technology strategically to teach the Word of God to new and growing believers”.*

Bible teaching remains a huge need here today, and a quick history lesson helps us understand why.

Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948 after a long history of colonisation - first under the Portuguese, then the Dutch, and finally the British. Each of these occupying forces introduced their own brand of Christianity, the traces of which remain evident today. The countryside is dotted not only with Buddhist temples and Hindu shrines, but also with statues of Catholic saints and ornate church buildings. Sri Lanka is a deeply religious place.

Against such a background, there is a vital need for outreach which has the Bible at its heart. And this outreach is required not just among the Buddhist majority or the Hindu and Muslim minorities, but also among the many nominal Christians who have no understanding of the gospel and thus no vital faith in Jesus Christ.

Each morning, many Sri Lankans switch on their radios and are greeted with a short gospel presentation which goes out over the airwaves at 5.45am. Another key opportunity is during the evening commute, when a testimony is shared daily by someone who has found new life in Jesus. These recordings are broadcast in Sinhala, the heart language of the country’s 15 million Buddhists who make up 70% of the population. Phone calls and written correspondence have been received from listeners all over the island, many of whom are eager to find out more about Christ.

MASS MEDIA

As we watch, our friends are working on some final edits to a video recorded last week, when a local Bible teacher was invited to the studio. Eager to get people reading God’s Word, the leaders here are committed to producing high-quality programmes which are biblically sound and gospel-centred. Today’s message is being prepared as a TV broadcast for Tamil speakers, most of whom are Hindu, Muslim or nominally Christian. Working in this darkened, sound-proofed room, the engineers may appear distant and removed from the work of evangelism, but they are serving the Lord faithfully where he has placed them. Each of them is heartened in the knowledge that many Sri Lankans have found Christ through their radio and TV ministry over the years.

PROVIDING FOR PASTORS

The organisation’s three-fold vision of evangelism, discipleship and training also incorporates work among pastors. The team encourage and equip leaders to teach the Bible faithfully and to be good role models as husbands and fathers. Over the years, they have discovered that many church leaders lack a biblical understanding of marriage and family and serve with little or no accountability in this regard. Last year, 300 pastors attended a conference addressing this subject, and a network of small groups is being developed through which church leaders will have new access to opportunities for regular fellowship and mutual accountability.

CHILDHOOD CHALLENGES

Leaving the studio, we pay a quick visit to the bookshop. The shelves are well-stocked with a range of Bibles, devotionals and study materials for adults and children alike. In speaking to the team, we discover that the work among children is vital amid the many strains on family life. Fathers often travel away for work and, with mothers also working long hours, children are often neglected. This leaves them facing many challenges. Our friends tell us of outreach programmes designed to address those needs, with children not only enjoying nutritious meals but also receiving Bible teaching. Through this work, many have heard of Jesus for the first time.

Finishing our visit, we ask our host how we can pray for the team. He replies, *“Please pray that each of the workers would be well equipped, be creative and stay personally close to the Lord”.*

Amen! ■

READY TO GO

Mobilising the Sri Lankan church for mission.

What are the marks of a healthy church? Answers will certainly include faithful proclamation of God's Word, fidelity to biblical doctrine and the discipleship of believers. Another inarguable sign of a healthy church is a commitment to reaching the lost for Christ. A healthy church is a sending church; one which equips, inspires, and supports its members to reach unbelievers with the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, it was from a desire to bring unreached people to Christ that the church in Sri Lanka was planted. Across the centuries, many denominations have sought to witness here and the fruit of their labours is the existence of a small but faithful church on the island. However, though it has been many years since the church in Sri Lanka really took off, and though it became established, independent and mature, there has been little enthusiasm for missions among the believers.

In an effort to end decades of inaction, a new movement was initiated by mission-minded leaders. Having seen a great need for gospel workers across South Asia, particularly in lands hostile to the Christian faith, these leaders began connecting with churches, holding teaching conferences and encouraging pastors to preach more regularly on the call to make disciples of all nations.

In the years since, God has been gracious and our partnership with this movement has been blessed with much fruit. A good number of Sri Lankans have responded to the call to make Jesus known. They have received training not only in doctrine and preaching, but also in addressing the specific cultures into which they have been sent. Those who have gone into the mission field from Sri Lanka have an advantage over those from further afield, since the contexts into which they are placed often share facets of their own backgrounds, sometimes including a common or similar language.

This head start is particularly crucial when we consider

the difficult places the workers are heading into. One nation, which we will call Country X, is almost entirely Muslim and yet has a strong link with Sri Lanka, making it easier for workers to migrate. The risks faced by gospel workers in this country are considerable, and so the sensitivity possessed by the Sri Lankan workers due to their deep understanding of the culture is crucial for ministry.

The impact these migrant workers are able to have among the local people group is wonderful. One leads a team who are in regular contact with 56 Muslims, working hard to build relationships and share the gospel. A young woman who has completed her training with our partners will soon be heading out to live and work among the people in Country X. She has already secured a job and is expecting her work visa to arrive soon. Meanwhile, a couple who have a heart for those people have been working among the ex-patriate community in Sri Lanka, but are eager to serve in Country X itself. They are searching for jobs in order to make this a viable endeavour.

Sri Lankan workers have also been sent to Nepal, India and Bangladesh, and others will soon depart for the challenging contexts of China and Myanmar.

However, even where the physical act of going is not always possible, this digital age presents us with more ways to reach people for Christ than ever before. Our partners have trained many young people to join an online outreach team focused on reaching the Muslim people of Country X. The team have begun using social media to befriend people, enabling the gospel to be shared and allowing in-person events to be planned for further outreach.

Having once been an inward-looking community of believers, the church in Sri Lanka is blossoming into a mission-minded community, eager to see God's name praised across the nation and throughout the continent of Asia. Hallelujah! ■



HOW TO PRAY

- Praise God for the ways he is using the Sri Lankan church for His glory!
- Ask that He would bless those who have a vision for mission among the people.
- Pray for those who go out from Sri Lanka, that they would be mighty witnesses for the Lord.
- Ask that even more workers would be raised up for the harvest, both within Sri Lanka and beyond.



Joel remains passionate about winning souls in countries where declaring faith in Jesus Christ can result in a death sentence, and where sharing Jesus with others can bring immediate arrest.

BLESSED WITH A BURDEN

Colombo was around eight hours away from Joel's hometown on the east side of Sri Lanka. However, his heart became heavy as his father told him to go and live there so as to escape being recruited by the LTTE (the Tamil Tigers). It was a brutal time to live in Sri Lanka. Joel knew of others who had not escaped and ended up paying with their lives. But as he reflects now, he recognises how God not only kept him safe, but also used that situation to introduce him to Jesus. Now, Joel enjoys living and working in this part of the island where you are never far from the sound of waves ebbing and flowing on the turquoise blue sea.

These days, Joel is a family man with a wife and two beautiful children to care for. His elder child, a girl, is small for her age. She suffers from severe scoliosis and some facial disfigurement, as well as partial blindness, and is incredibly shy despite being very bright. Joel's son, who is ten years younger than his sister, has boundless energy and wants to be permanently attached to his dad.

Dorcas, Joel's wife, is a strong yet sensitive woman. She carries pain and brokenness from the death of three dear friends with whom she had shared her life and her faith, in the hope that they would come to know Jesus as Saviour. All three died without Christ and the impact of those deaths was far harder to bear than the illness and surgeries endured by their daughter in recent years. A crisis of faith took the family back to where Joel's walk with Jesus began - to Colombo. Here, even in her brokenness, Dorcas remains steadfast by Joel's side in the ministry to which God has called them.

Joel's journey from his childhood home to his present accommodation involved a number of twists and turns,

largely resulting from a God-given passion for the lost. Along with a number of others who work with our partners, Joel is particularly burdened for the people of Country X. At one point, he and his family lived in India and ministered discreetly among people from that nation.

It's raining again and as he makes his way to work, muttering to himself about how he hates rain, and in fact thinks he might be allergic to it, he contemplates the day ahead. Yesterday was his weekly day of fasting and praying, a practice he diligently keeps before God. This practice always refreshes his spirit, even if it doesn't affect his intolerance of rain. Joel remains passionate about winning souls in countries where declaring faith in Jesus Christ can result in a death sentence, and where sharing Jesus with others can bring immediate arrest. Joel knows he cannot go to these places, but God in His amazing grace has granted him access to a community of those people right here in Colombo. Here, he is able to pray for and minister to them, with the biggest challenges being to build trusting friendships and to find creative ways of sharing Jesus.

Tonight, Joel will speak in a local church on the plight of these dear people and their need for salvation. He longs to see others burdened for Country X in the same way he is. He yearns for that burden to drive them to their knees as they plead for the eternal destiny of souls dear to God's heart. He prays constantly for God to give him opportunities to break into what is a closed and suspicious community.

Even as he thinks about his message tonight, his eyes light up in anticipation knowing what God wants to do in and through Joel for His glory. It is a privilege to join God's work, and a blessing to have been given such a burden. ■

FISHERS OF MEN

Casting our nets with prayer and patience.

An amazing sight greets you as you gaze across the crystal-clear waters of Sri Lanka's south coast. Perched just offshore, the stilt fishermen have become a famous tourist attraction, drawing many visitors each year. As the waves gently roll in, they sit suspended above the water to ensure that no shadows disturb the sea-life below. With one hand on the stilt and the other on the bamboo fishing rod, they patiently wait for the line to tug. Each catch is then pulled from the water and bagged in the little net tied to their waist.

The practice is thought to have started during World War 2 when food shortages led to Sri Lankans crowding the coastline to provide food for their hungry families. After the tsunami of 2014, people started to rebuild their lives and those who lost their homes moved further inland. Now, with fewer people living on the shoreline, the practice of stilt-fishing is becoming more a tourist attraction than a means of income. Some enterprising locals have begun earning money by renting their stilts to tourists looking for a

photo opportunity as they pose as fishermen.

In Mark's gospel, another shoreline was the setting for a remarkable encounter Jesus had with some fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. Some had been mending their nets on the shore and others were casting their nets into the water when they received a personal invitation which would change their lives forever. Jesus' call was to follow Him, and many did. They left their nets and became disciples of the Man of Galilee. This invitation to



Simon and Andrew were ordinary men. When Jesus called them to be fishers of men, they had no idea what He could do through them.

follow Jesus was accompanied with the promise that He would make them fishers of men.

When we become followers of Jesus, that similar passion grips our lives. Both at home and abroad, there are millions who are hopelessly lost without a Saviour. Facing up to this calling on our lives, we carry that challenge to step out in faith, casting our net with the message of the gospel to catch the unreached, the hurting and the broken. We pray and work with patient endurance, doing what we can to reach

every culture, belief system, social standing and demographic for Christ.

Simon and Andrew were ordinary men. When Jesus called them to be fishers of men, they had no idea what He could do through them. They had many qualities as hard working and courageous fishermen but the task ahead of them would require patience, strength and resilience.

The great task of evangelism often requires risk, faith and patience, but we take comfort because as followers of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is at work within

us, equipping and empowering us to become fishers of men. Just because we have been active in evangelism in the past, we have no reason to stop fishing today. Throughout every season of our lives, we must actively share the gospel and labour with others, trusting and praying that one day our catch will contain those from every tongue, people group and nation. One day we will rejoice together, worshipping the One who not only called us, but who equipped us and was with us through it all. ■

REACHING THE RODIYA

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There are no known believers
among this frontier people group.



There are around 18,000 Rodiya people in Sri Lanka, with most living in the southern and central regions. There are no known believers among this frontier people group who follow their own unique blend of Buddhist beliefs and practices.

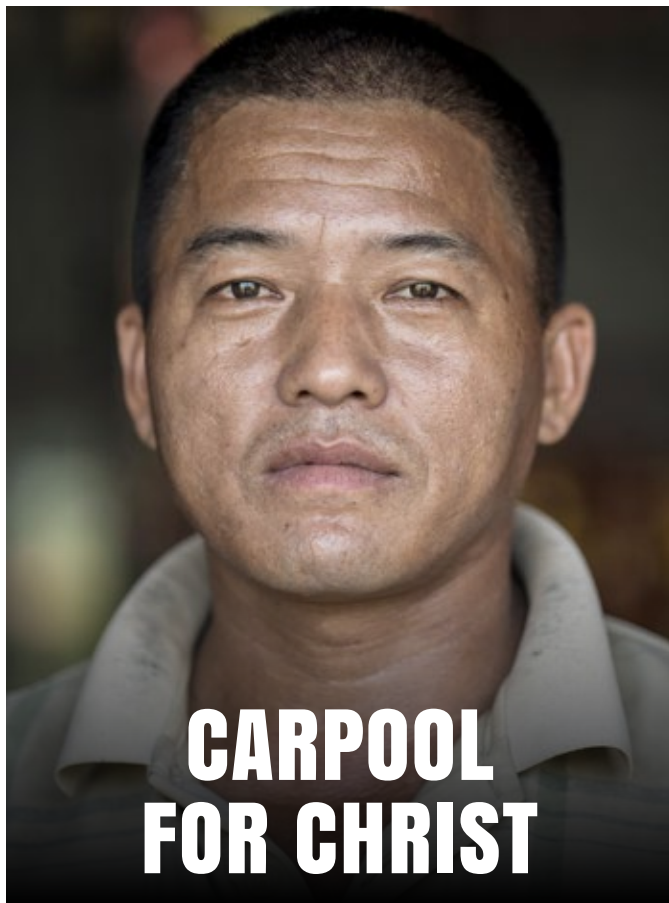
Traditionally, the Rodiya were considered outcasts or untouchables, possibly stemming from the folklore surrounding their origins. Stories about them include gruesome tales of deceit and cannibalism. For many years, Rodiya people had no option but to beg for food as they were denied any opportunity to work. Attitudes have slowly changed, but those who do find employment are typically restricted to menial, low-paid work.

In the highlands, where many of the Rodiya live, the main source of employment is on the tea plantations. Here, some workers earn around 50 pence per day. In some areas, strict quotas are imposed on the workers, and they face tremendous pressure to pluck 18kg of tea leaves per day. The added danger of leeches and snakes lurking among the plantations makes for a very difficult and perilous day's work.

Previously, the Rodiya were very clannish, isolated from the wider community and having their own language. Latterly, they have integrated more into Sri Lankan society and many now speak the national language, Sinhala. Thankfully, there are many Sinhala speaking Christians in Sri Lanka and lots of evangelistic and discipleship material available in that language. Our prayer is that this will give the church greater opportunity to share the good news of Jesus with the Rodiya people. ■

HOW TO PRAY

- Pray that the church in Sri Lanka will be moved with compassion to reach out to the Rodiya with the love of Jesus.
- Pray that believers will be able to help those in extreme poverty and find creative ways to share the gospel with them.
- Pray that many will trust in Christ, leading to a healthy network of Bible-centred churches among the Rodiya people.



Monsoon season has arrived in Nepal, causing many travel difficulties. Roads are blocked due to floods and landslides and lives have sadly been lost. We do, however, give thanks that our partner Batsal was able to safely visit a major city to teach young people.

Batsal wanted to make the most of his return journey, which he expected to take around seven hours. On the lookout for hitchhikers with whom he could share the gospel, Batsal prayed for passengers and the Lord answered! As he was leaving the city, he met three people hoping for a ride. For seven hours, Batsal was able to talk with the trio about his faith.

One passenger was particularly interested and asked many questions about the Christian faith, church and changing religion. By the journey's end, the man had accepted a tract and a book explaining how faith in Christ is the only means of salvation.

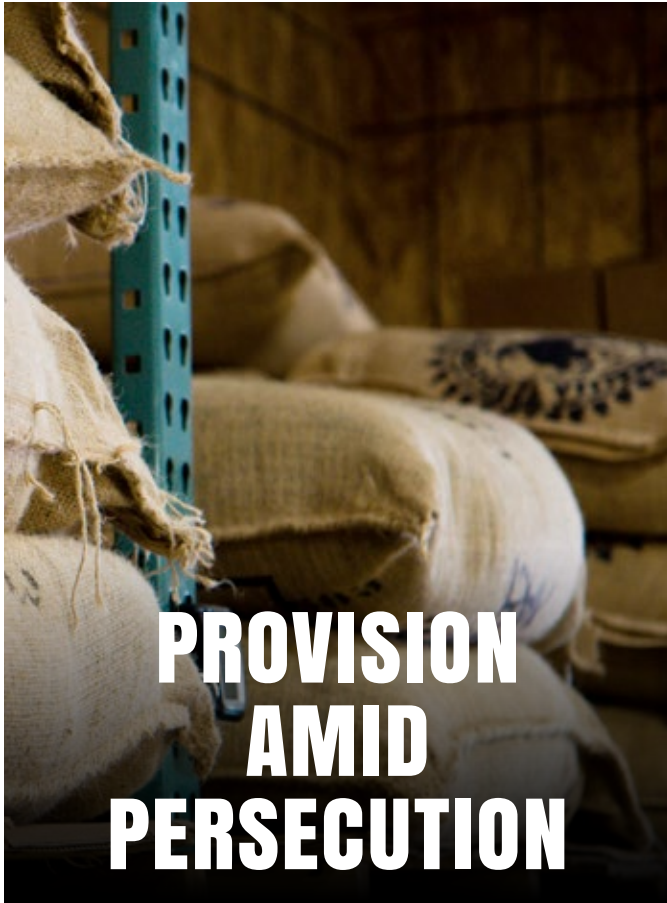
Please pray that the Lord would continue to work in this man's heart and save him. Batsal also asks for prayer for a large teaching conference he is planning. May the Lord work in the lives of young people and use them for His glory! ■



Conflict in Myanmar continues as the Burmese army attack residents of Karen State in the east. Our partner has been providing refuge and aid to those affected by the ethnic conflict here for many years.

After multiple airstrikes in the region, 400 displaced people had an urgent need for assistance. Those affected had already fled their homes and villages to settle in a makeshift camp where they thought they would be safe. However, this camp was one target of the airstrikes, which caused thousands to flee once more. One woman caught in the chaos expressed her feelings of hopelessness, "No matter where we run, we can't escape. They attack the camps both day and night."

Crucial aid has been provided to these people thanks to your support. Tents have been erected to house those who had to flee, and food has been provided. Our partner asks that we pray for the war to stop, and for the tens of thousands of people who have fled and are living in very primitive shelter in the jungle. Pray that the team will be able to keep sharing the message of hope with displaced people, even in these dangerous circumstances. ■



PROVISION AMID PERSECUTION

Our partners in South-East Asia have been running a Rice Aid project, providing basic food provisions to poor and persecuted church families across a nation opposed to Christ. 92 rural fellowships are now benefiting from the project themselves or running feeding programmes for children in their communities. In some cases, adults in the villages are earning just 50 pence per day.

Among one group where 187 of God's people are forced to meet in secret, the provision of rice has been accompanied by other practical provisions such as metal roofing sheets for their homes, along with Bible teaching and other forms of spiritual encouragement. The team were delighted to provide Bibles to this fellowship, along with small solar-powered lights to help them read during hours of darkness.

In June, the team were excited to report that 21 villagers had asked Jesus into their hearts, with 15 being baptised. However, four families were ordered out of their villages because of their decision to follow Christ. They too are being supported through the Rice Aid project.

We give thanks that God is working powerfully here, despite severe persecution. Please pray that God would keep his people through all kinds of trials. ■



SACRIFICIAL SERVICE

Bilol grew up on Uzbekistan's Afghan border and often heard the devastating sounds of conflict across the river. There were no Christian leaders nearby, so pastors would travel from afar once per month to disciple the church. Bilol felt very alone amid constant challenges from the authorities. He was fined, beaten by the police, and even tortured by the security service. Aged 18, he had needles inserted under his fingernails as they sought to extract information on other believers. He said nothing.

When Bilol's pastor suggested that he study at our partner university, UDG, he agreed immediately. He wanted to deepen his theological background and serve the church. He studied theology, learnt to serve, and was trained to preach.

It wasn't easy going home. He faced persecution but was determined to continue. Today, his ministry involves evangelistic outreach and discipleship in local house churches - there are no registered churches in the region. Bilol is the only UDG graduate in the area, and nobody else has training in leadership or preaching. Some appreciate his work, but others are jealous of his training. Please pray that God would use Bilol to strengthen the believers here and lead many to Christ. ■

ON THE ROAD!

It has been a busy summer for the AsiaLink team as we've exhibited at conferences and teaching weeks across the UK and Ireland. Thank you to everyone who stopped to say hello and find out what God is doing in Asia! It has been wonderful to meet and chat with so many people about our amazing God and the need for the gospel in Asia. ■



NEWS FROM ASIA

DEADLY MONSOONS STRIKE ASIA

Over 100 people were reported dead in July. Japan's Kyushu Island saw 8 deaths whilst northern India saw flash floods. In Delhi people waded through waist-high waters and there were fears of damage to the Taj Mahal. Infrastructure was destroyed and lives were lost in Chongqing, China.

THAILAND'S REFORMIST LEADER FAILS TO BECOME PM

Despite winning the May national election, Mr Limjaroenrat failed to gain the backing of the 249 senators installed by the previous military government. Thailand will head back to another election to break the deadlock and establish a government.

UZBEK ELECTIONS QUESTIONED

International observers claimed that the presidential election was technically well prepared but lacked genuine competition. Whilst improvements have been made, a lack of meaningful engagement with voters and procedural irregularities cast doubt on the likelihood of a free election any time soon.

SIKH SEPARATIST KILLED IN CANADA

Hardeep Singh Najjar was shot by masked gunmen outside his temple in British Columbia. Fellow supporters of a separate Sikh homeland, Khalistan, point the finger at India, who had termed Mr Najjar a 'terrorist'. In the UK, Mr Avtar Singh Khanda, head of the Khalistan Liberation Force, died in 'mysterious circumstances' in June.

A DAY OF THANKFULNESS



At the beginning of July, our team had a special day together in Liverpool. We were joined by Melinda Hendry from Living Leadership, who helped us reflect on prioritising spiritual restfulness in ministry. We thank Melinda for serving us in this way, and for her thoughtful reflections on working from a place of rest.

We were also honoured to be joined by Neil & Gill Towers. For well over 20 years, Neil has voluntarily overseen AsiaLink's payroll. A framed picture from our travels in Asia was presented to Neil as a small token of our immense gratitude for his many years of service. ■





Praise God for two teams of young adults who travelled to South-East Asia this summer to serve the local church!

Between the two teams, hundreds of Bibles were provided to the underground church. Alongside this, ministry to refugee children and young people from a closed nation also took place.

Pray with us that the Lord would use the team's efforts to grow His Kingdom, and thank God for each individual who served Him in this way.

Register your interest in a future HistoryMakers trip at

historymakers.info/go

