

In this issue's *inSpire* Interactive, we offer alumni/ae the opportunity to share reflections on the tsunami disaster in Southeast Asia last December. The number of responses we received from around the country and the world topped all previous *inSpire* Interactive responses.

What was your reaction, or the reaction of your congregation or ministry setting, to the earthquake and tsunami disaster in Southeast Asia?

Friday after the tsunami someone asked on PresbyNet how to deal with it on Sunday; being at liberty I shot off my mouth and said I'd junk the regular service, find tsunami-scripture, and tell them how to respond. At noon I got a frantic call from a worship chair whose supply preacher was in the hospital. Could I do their service? The service was rough, ragged, and wonderful. I told the folks they ought to respond, and that I was going to forward my honorarium to Presbyterian Disaster Assistance.

In the narthex a man handed me a folded check and asked me to forward it also. Monday I sent two checks totaling \$10,143.20. That's right, ten grand.

Good service, I think that means.
Houston Hodges (M.Div., 1954)
Huntsville, Alabama

The churches in our country are so often seeking to help people quiet the tremors of their anxiety. While seeking to help in the tsunami tragedy we can address this anxiety. The tectonic plates underlie the whole of the natural order, even the life and well-being of the human family, including church people.

The joy of our life is in living out the love of God that we meet in Jesus Christ. Our strength is in trusting that love, not in more successfully anesthetizing anxiety.
Gayle W. Threlkeld (M.Div., 1954)
Birmingham, Alabama

Whatever answer might help would come not from rational examination of the phenomena themselves but from personal experience with God who is called into question. Tsunamis occur randomly consequent to general corruption of an originally perfect creation, and they parallel moral corruption of human nature, perhaps as a symptom of malaise and an alert to the need for restoration. Whatever happens in this world, God has something to do with it. If not of cause, then at least by tolerance. If we cannot eliminate them, we can at least protect against such disasters and provide relief from them.
Wallace Alcorn (Th.M., 1965)
Austin, Minnesota

On the first Sunday of the new year, we suggested that in light of the disaster, a more appropriate greeting than "Happy New Year" would be Jesus' triple greeting in Matthew's gospel: "Take heart!" But how does one say that to families destroyed by the tsunami? I mentioned that on the news I saw relief workers unloading bags of food from the back of a truck in Indonesia. Each bag was stamped with three letters: CWS—for Church World Service. The church is there in all that tragedy with the still small voice of hope: Take heart.

Within ten days the congregation of Davidson College Presbyterian Church had contributed more than \$10,000 to Presbyterian Disaster Assistance for tsunami relief. It is a small drop in a huge bucket, but it is how we say, for Jesus, take heart.
Allen Brindisi (M.Div., 1971)
Davidson, North Carolina

At Washington National Cathedral, the National House of Prayer for All People, we responded in a variety of ways. The following prayer, written by our canon preceptor, was featured on our web site.

O God, with all of the people of the world I lift my voice in prayer. Recreate human communities, rebuilding cities and villages, bringing families and friends together in sorrow and in hope, giving peace to those who mourn.
Bring new life to the land and sea, restoring the waters, renewing the earth, healing the creatures that survive, and giving new life.
Make me an instrument of divine charity and mercy, of hope and new possibility. Give me eyes to see, ears to hear, and a generous heart ready to serve you and those who suffer at this time.

Our vicar, the Right Reverend A. Theodore Eastman, challenged our community with "A Supplemental Way to Celebrate New Year's Eve." He suggested that we send a check to Episcopal Relief and Development, the disaster response arm of the Episcopal Church, in the same amount that we spent on ourselves celebrating New Year's Eve!

The Washington Hebrew Congregation, the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, and our congregation jointly sponsored a "Benefit Concert for the Victims of the Tsunami Earthquake."

And one hundred percent of the offering at the cathedral's 11:00 a.m. service on January 2 was sent to Episcopal Relief and Development. We will continue to accept donations for South Asian emergency relief, and to date, close to \$25,000 has been received.
Dean McDonald (b, 1974)
Washington, D.C.

Suddenly, as my daughter Kathryn emerged from a hotel store, there he was: a beautifully decorated Indian elephant sporting a huge cushion on his back. "Wow! Look—I finally get to ride an elephant." The trainer motioned to her; the elephant knelt down, extended his left rear leg, which Kathryn clambered up. Holding on tight as the elephant rose, she triumphantly posed for pictures of the last item on her "to do" list for her three months in India and Sri Lanka.

On the day after Christmas, as the waves of approaching water rose rapidly higher, a brightly decorated elephant on the southern shore of India sensed danger, walked calmly along the beach collecting children, and carried them to higher ground, safely away from the tsunami.

Our daughter had changed her mind about extending her stay, and returned home the week before Christmas. It was the best present we could have received. She was troubled watching the news and remembering the new friends she had left behind.

For all of us, it confirmed an American Indian Mohawk phrase that translates, "We are all related."
J. Roger Skelley-Watts (M.Div., 1974)
Cleveland, Ohio

Greetings from Osan Air Base in the Republic of Korea, 48 miles from the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). I am serving as the wing chaplain to the 51 Fighter Wing in what is known as Mig Alley. We in Korea were shocked to learn that our neighbors to the south had undergone such a disaster on what the British call Boxing Day. The air base community held its collective breath for several days as we waited to hear from Air Force members and their families who were in Thailand soaking up the tropical Christmas sun. Thanks be to God, all of our folks returned safely to Korea.

Our ecumenical chapel community of Catholics and Protestants immediately responded with a Sunday offering of more than \$2,400 to Catholic Relief Services and more than \$5,000 to the Red Cross.

We are preparing to send a group of civil engineers to rebuild runways and erect shelters in the tsunami-devastated area. They exist to go into war zones to erect "bare bones" airbases, and build runways to receive troops and supplies. Needless to say they are very excited about using their training in support of a humanitarian relief mission!

The United States Air Force Chaplain Service gave an immediate \$50,000 for relief (from chapel collections), and that is just from our higher headquarters. We will not know for many months what the entire Air Force Chapel community worldwide will give, but I believe the figure will be staggering.
Jeffrey G. Guild (M.Div., 1978)
Osan Air Base, Republic of Korea

I am pastor of the Waldensian Presbyterian Church in Monett, Missouri. We decided to take up a collection for the next six months for the tsunami victims. One person decided to up their pledge 10 percent in the following manner—10 percent to the church and 10 percent to the tsunami victims—and encouraged the rest of the congregation to do the same.

We will see what happens in the next six months. The church has 96 on the roll; and about 50–60 come every Sunday.
Vicki L. Evans (M.Div., 1980)
Monett, Missouri

On a rare sunny Sunday afternoon in Portland, a friend and I went bicycling. As we talked, he shared his reflections on the tsunami, saying that while horrific, he felt it paled in comparison to the tragedy of AIDS in Africa. Effectively, he said, a "tsunami" of this magnitude hits Africa every three weeks, with 2.3 million Africans dying of AIDS in 2004.

I reflected on how we respond to emergent crises with compassion, and how quickly our efforts wane. As Christ's church, we cannot afford to do less. We are called to seek the suffering, but not only those on tonight's news.
Doug McClure (M.Div., 1981)
Milwaukie, Oregon

In my preaching, I was led to reflect on the pro-Western bias of news coverage of tsunami victims and what that says about us as media consumers, whose preferences drive editorial decisions. "At least eight Americans among the dead"; announced one early Associated Press headline, "and 25,000 others." Were the sufferings of a blond-haired, blue-eyed Swedish toddler or a vacationing *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit model truly more worthy of our attention than those of the Thai nationals who worked cleaning their hotel rooms? The tsunami swept away more than buildings. It also swept away our pretensions as Westerners who are sadly inclined to be bound by national and ethnic identity.
Carlos Wilton (M.Div., 1982)
Point Pleasant Beach, New Jersey

On January 2 I preached about Jesus as the light that overcomes the darkness (chapter six on theodicy in PTS professor Dan Migliore's recently revised *Faith Seeks Understanding* was helpful reading) and we sang a new hymn. "O God, That Great Tsunami" resulted when Peter Holden, an Australian pastor who has served in Indonesia, revised one of my wife Carolyn's [M.Div., 1985] hymns; it was put on the web sites of Church World Service, the PCUSA, UMC, and UCA. Church school children also did artwork that we mailed out in a special appeal. Part of the Limestone Church's celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day was making CWS health kits.
Bruce Gillette (M.Div., 1984)
Wilmington, Delaware

An air force reserve chaplain, I went on active duty 21 months ago to serve at Dover Air Force Base. We've sent tons of cargo out of Dover in support of the war against terrorism. We've brought human remains back and done "dignified transfers" of the remains from the planes to the mortuary to hometowns all over America. Recently, we sent out our first tsunami relief flight. While the men and women of the two airlift wings believe strongly in what they do, these particular missions filled them with a great joy in serving their fellow human beings.
John W. Groth (M.Div., 1984, Th.M., 1996)
Newark, Delaware

The devastation of the tsunami reminds us that the Word of God, made flesh in the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, is a Word-for-others. This year in Nashville, during the Christmas holidays, our family joined thousands of others whose lives were interrupted by this Word. When the news reached us we dropped gifts and gadgets and raced to computers to click-and-give to Oxfam or the Red Cross, called local churches and denominational offices for giving opportunities, emptied childhood piggy banks, and donated food or clothing to local relief agencies. No time for fellow church members or my students or faculty colleagues to stop and dabble with questions like "Why, God?" The question first and foremost on our minds remains: "God, how can we help?"
John McClure (Ph.D., 1984)
Nashville, Tennessee

The stories that have come out of southern Thailand are powerful testimonies to faith and fear alike, stories of deliverance and loss, experiences of assistance and abandonment. But it is not the ocean waves, in spite of their enormity, that win out. It is the even more incredible wave of love that rises from God's people that wins.

Respective of the size of the tsunami, love has won again. And it is showing in the faith, deliverance, and assistance we are experiencing here in Thailand from the Christian agencies, people, and programs active here. Praise God for his faithfulness.
Glen Hallead (M.Div., 1986)
Nong Kwai, Hang Dong, Thailand

"How could a loving and all-powerful God allow such suffering?" I still pray as I've prayed for years: may my "answer" be the evidence of my life and faith. I worship the Triune God without interruption; kneel for comfort before the open arms of Jesus, my master and brother-in-suffering; stand in mystified silence before the same Christ in God-beyond-us.
Fred Mendez (M.Div., 1986)
Parsippany, New Jersey

"Then Marduk considered Tiamat. He skimmed spume from the bitter sea, heaped up the clouds, spindrift of wet and wind and cooling rain, the spittle of Tiamat!"

What are we to make of chaos? For some 80,000 Indonesians lost their lives as the tsunami swept debris and sea water six kilometers inland into homes and buildings, crushing them, and damaging roads and bridges, telecommunications, water and electricity supplies, crops, irrigation and fishery infrastructure, food and fuel outlets.

Banda Aceh will be the focus of the Church World Service response in Indonesia. CWS plans to assist 50,000 displaced persons in Banda Aceh, with a special emphasis on female-headed households, widows, children, the elderly, unemployed families with limited means of support, and people or families who have not yet received aid or support.
Patrick B. Walker (M.Div., 1986)
Middleburg, Pennsylvania

My clerk of session, Pat, was vacationing in Sri Lanka when the tsunami hit. She and her husband were there with one of their sons and his family. Here is an email we received from them.

"The experience in Sri Lanka was life-changing. These catastrophes are no longer just something that happen on the other side of the world. It is difficult to articulate what those few days did to me. We were so blessed to have been where we were when the tsunami hit—the highest point in Sri Lanka, literally.

"It was a point where you could hike and look out directly to Antarctica with nothing in between except water. It was hazy—we couldn't see Antarctica. But just 36 hours either way and we would have been in the midst of the tragedy. We were to travel to the beach the next day and both places where we were booked were destroyed. In fact, the owner and seven foreign tourists were missing from the place in Yalle where we were headed the next day. This was on the eastern coast, which was hit the hardest.

"Then we were headed for Galle. That area is on the more southerly coast and was devastated, as well."

Tonight, Pat sang in the alto section of our church choir, right next to my wife, Jeana. We are so thankful to God that she made it back home safely.
James E. Deal (M.Div., 1989)
East Wenatchee, Washington

As I prepared to write a sermon about the tsunami, I came across some powerful information in a summary of the news online at *Christianity Today*. According to the article, in mid-December, the United Nations issued a report detailing the deaths of more than 29,000 children every single day as a result of avoidable disease and malnutrition. That is more than 10 million children a year. There is a dramatic difference between the coverage of the tsunami and the almost nonexistent coverage of the UN report. Imagine if every single day there were headlines in every newspaper in the world and on every television show saying, "29,000 children died yesterday from preventable diseases and malnutrition."

I think that about 21 percent of the food prepared in the United States is thrown away. That food could feed the world's starving millions.

There is so much work to be done!

Some years ago, I was trying to find an adoptive son of an eleven-year-old Russian orphan. When I explained the situation to a dear friend, he said, "Anne, there are too many sad stories." Of course, he is right, but we have to respond to the sad stories that come our way. My family adopted the child.
Anne Benefield (M.Div., 1990)
Potomac, Maryland

Thanks for not ignoring this dreadful event in the pages of *inSpire*. My wife is from Asia. When we hear of such disasters, our hearts rise into our throats. "Where did it happen? Were any of our own family affected?"

I used the Book of Job as a reference in a sermon that addressed the disasters. I must admit that even my own conclusions didn't truly satisfy me: "It's ultimately a mystery. Our ways are not God's ways." It may be said that God is not responsible for the twin disasters. God didn't do this. It's a meteorological phenomenon. But surely the believer has to admit that God has at least permitted it.

We may identify with Job and with Jesus in their trials and suffering. But when it comes to the weather, we cannot attribute an intent or purpose to any of it, good or bad. That's what makes me sick. I cannot (yet) theologize enough about the earthquake and tsunami to reach a conclusion that sufficiently explains any meaning to it. Weather is random after all, yes?

Then I pause and remember that violent weather happens all over the place, all over the globe, on any given day. That certainly puts a different frame around the issue.
Jack Moriarty (Th.M., 1992)
Ellicottville, New York

Our church, the Wayzata Community United Church of Christ in the Twin Cities, is conducting a Service of Prayer this evening [January 12] for the victims. The theme, which has been resonating with all of the clergy, is the words of John Donne, adapted for our time: "No one is an island in and of itself. Every person is a piece of the continent, a part of the world. If a clod be washed away by the sea, the world is the less. Any person's death diminishes me, because I am involved in humanity. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee." Throughout the service there will be five brief biographies read of those who have perished, a brief meditation, prayers, and an offering that will be divided between Church World Service and Unicef. Our main concern is to help our congregation "connect" with a tragedy so far away from home by seeking to personalize the numbing body count.
James R. Newby (D.Min., 1992)
Wayzata, Minnesota

I feel a particular affinity for the victims in Thailand, since I served as a missionary in Thailand for a year and a half and vacationed in Phuket, the second-hit area. My Thai minister friend there is struggling with how to understand it theologically, but right now she feels as though it has second-concomitant implications. We need to pray that Thai Christians will be able to clearly respond to this situation in a country that is 95 percent Buddhist and probably further convinced that this is just another sign that all life is suffering.

It's hard enough for me to wrap my mind around the devastation and the numbers involved, but I find myself even more numbed when the loss is expressed in generations. I heard a local family share how relatives in Sri Lanka had gathered for a holiday celebration, and in an instant three generations in that family were gone. How do you begin to grasp the significance of something like that?

(Eccles. 1:4) My mind a verse echoes from Ecclesiastes: "Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever."
(Eccles. 1:2) In light of the recent and disturbing expression of this thought, I'm determined to join in the despairing mood of that book, but something holds me back.

Maybe it's another verse that reminds me there is something even more true: "The plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations." (Psalm 33:11 NIV)

Somehow in the rubble and the tears there is an opportunity for the world's people to express the purposes of God's heart, which are firm and true both for the generations lost and the generations lost. May we find a way to express that with compassion, respect, and grace.
Grand Brown (M.Div., 1994)
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Sunday morning, December 26, I woke up to NPR as usual and heard a short report about an earthquake and "tidal wave" in the Indian Ocean that possibly killed two or three thousand people. I remember thinking that it was an immense tragedy that so many lives were lost, and before going to church added an additional line, a gloss really, to the prayers of the people. Little did anyone know that a loss of life on the order of September 11th would be considered a blessing.

So how does a small congregation respond to mind-boggling tragedy? Within two days I had an email from a longtime deacon, prodding me to investigate denominational opportunities for giving. A short pulpit appeal a week later produced hundreds of dollars toward tsunami relief. The church office has continued to receive requests for information on where to send funds. A phone call from a cable television reporter led to a story about the congregation's efforts to develop disaster relief packets of toiletries and also provided an opportunity to engage the community in a more hands-on effort than simply writing a check.

In the midst of great tragedy, we do indeed ask the unanswerable questions about God's presence. But even more so, we look for something to do.
Judy Cuthbertson (M.Div., 1994)
Lomita, California

The congregation I serve (First Presbyterian Church in Marion, North Carolina) has never taken a Christmas Eve offering, but this November God put it on my heart to ask the session for permission to do so. We intended to send some things from the Samaritan's Purse Christmas catalogue to unknown destinations in the world. What has struck us all is how God was preparing resources to respond immediately to the tragedy. When the news of the earthquake and tsunami reached us, we had an offering authorized and ready to send!
Jim Wilken (M.Div., 1995)
Marion, North Carolina

We are faced with the worst natural disaster in history—in terms of loss of human life and property. Not a very hopeful beginning to a new year.

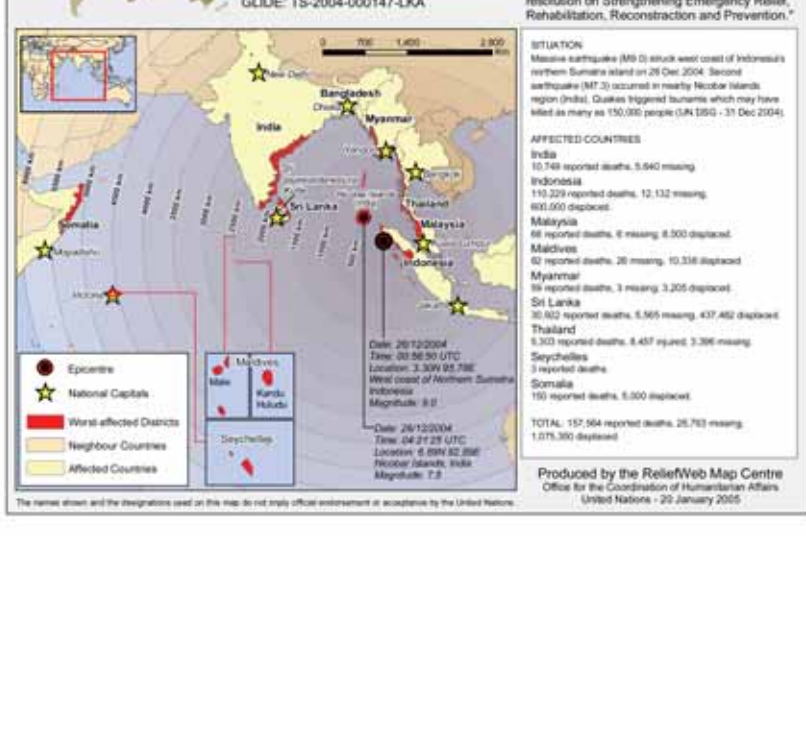
What are we to make of this? I've heard some raise the question: "Is God passing judgment on us?" I've heard others invoke imagery from the Book of Revelation—"There will be wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, natural disasters...the end times are upon us."

What I have heard mostly is the question "Why would God allow this to happen?" The final death toll may be 200,000 people, but the Book of Job says how many more might perish in the aftermath from disease and malnutrition.

There is one question, however, that we Christians have to ask ourselves, What is our part in this? How can we help? We are, after all, God's hands and God's voice in this world.
Leban Schaefer (M.Div., 1996)
Lebanon, Pennsylvania

Ten days after the tsunami in Southeast Asia, the banks of the Ohio River flooded my hometown of New Martinsville, West Virginia—its second major flood in four months. Each flood, though dreaded, does in fact bring the community together in ways that religion has never succeeded in doing. The tsunami affected many to action. It was as if folks who wanted to help overseas found a dust and ash of their energy right here at home. In a very practical way, Mother Nature's hard hand disciplines many to rise above the place to and throw our possessions and seek meaning in servitude.
Jeffrey Shade (M.Div., 1996)
New Martinsville, West Virginia

The great disaster in Aceh and Nias (North Sumatra) has moved people of all religions in Indonesia (and the world) to participate actively in rescuing the victims. Today (January 13) the number of dead bodies found has been more than 110,000, and there are still many under the ruins and missing in the ocean. Aceh is known as the most devout Muslim area of Indonesia. It is the only province where the Islamic Shariah law operates as civil law. Yet religious difference is irrelevant in the project of helping the Acehese and rehabilitating the area. Many churches in Indonesia gave immediate help to the people in Aceh. The Indonesian Christian Church, a partner church of the PCUSA, sent volunteer doctors, nurses, young people, civil engineers, teachers, and psychologists to the area. It also donated money from its emergency budget, and is still collecting donations from its congregations. Given the religious nature of the area, it is very important for churches to avoid the impression of help as a sort of evangelization. The work our church is doing is done without a Christian "flag." Please continue praying for the victims as well as the volunteers, and also for the Indonesian and world leaders that they may take a reasonable decision to make the reconstruction of the area economically possible.
Yahya Wijaya (Th.M., 1996)
Yogyakarta, Indonesia



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Yahya Wijaya (Th.M., 1996)
Yogyakarta, Indonesia



At the White Rock Baptist Church in Philadelphia, in addition to sending money, our children are writing letters of encouragement to the children of the VeAhavta orphanage in Sri Lanka. This has provided us with the opportunity to learn more about the world and how we can share with others. I hope that some pen-pal relationships may result and we will be able to share with other children in other parts of the world.

Jay Gardner (M.Div., 2000)
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



I work on human trafficking at the national headquarters of The Salvation Army. You may have seen headlines about the danger of the orphaned children being kidnapped and sold into slavery. My focus is on the United States, but my partner was interviewed on television about the subject on MSNBC. One of our development professionals received a donation to build a shelter for orphaned children in Sri Lanka.

Adam Freer (M.Div., 2002)
Alexandria, Virginia



I arrived in Aceh on January 1, one week after the tsunami, to support the CNN crew, some of whom have come from the other side of the earth.

I can add only a few experiences to the information deluging the airwaves. Like when I stood in the middle of the ruin, and looked 360 degrees around as far as the horizon. The few trees and buildings still standing here and there accentuated the devastation.

Or when I walked carefully among the debris, trying not to step in the mud or on some sharp objects, a few feet from the bodies not yet retrieved by the volunteers. Not the beautiful persons in beautiful caskets, but the nameless, bloated people whose numbers will be added into the tally of death. The smell of decay all around. And with every breath, the place entered you, and became part of you.

And the stories people told. No different than what you read in the newspapers, except that they were so close. And you touched their hands and, maybe, for a second, their hearts.

Is there a lesson from all this? At least one. The tsunami destroyed a large area and thousands of houses on the island of Simeulue near the epicenter. But only between eight and ten islanders died. At the beginning of the 20th century, a tsunami hit the island. Since then, every Simeulue islander has been taught from childhood that whenever the sea leaves the shore, they have to run to the hills.

I will have left this place before you read this. CNN is scaling down. On to the next big story—the Iraq election. The displaced people will find new homes and new jobs somehow. New entrepreneurs will arrive. The areas will be rebuilt, forgotten, and return to normal.

There are two girls who come to CNN's temporary base in Banda Aceh every day to help the cook. When the tsunami came, their parents put them and their older brother on a motorcycle and told them to outrun the water. They did. Their parents did not.

Every time we meet, they greet me with a big smile and hearty laughter. I always laugh with them.

Samsudin Berlian (M.Div., 2003)
Banda Aceh, Indonesia



We were on our way for our winter vacation to Chennai in South India on December 26. While on the train we heard that there was an earthquake in Chennai, but did not realize the seriousness of the situation. As our train approached Chennai on the morning of the 27th, I noticed and remarked to my daughter that the sea was unusually high when we passed over the backwaters of Ennore Creek. When we reached Chennai we were told of the tsunami and the destruction it caused.

What was encouraging was the way all the Christian NGOs sprung into action and began the relief work. Even the local churches responded quickly and began to help in whatever way they could. Back in Jabalpur our own church, the English Methodist Church, responded by praying for the victims and the relief work and making a collection to express their solidarity with the victims.

Stories of what happened and the suddenness with which it happened kept pouring in every day. We tried to go to the affected places, but were told that was impossible as it might hamper relief work.

I am reminded of what Jesus said in Luke. The signs of the coming of the Son of Man will be preceded by such events. These are the signs of the imminent return of Jesus Christ, so we as a church need to take fresh stock of our priorities. And also respond in love to those who are the victims. It reminds us that much of what we as human beings give importance to is temporary and any day can be snuffed out.

I read a story of a Christian worker who was in Nagapatnam holidaying with his family. Within seconds, while they were on the beach, he lost his three children and some of his relatives. He had to personally bury his three children on the beach as there was no help coming. He lost his family, but not his faith and the hope that he will meet them all one day.

There are such stories of sorrow and hope amidst the ruins of the tsunami.

John R.A. Simeon (Th.M., 2002)
Jabalpur, India