



Fiona and Les Allan

c/o Chandraghona Christian Hospital, PO Chandraghona,
Rangamati Hill District, Bangladesh
E-mail: allanf&l@bmsworldmission.org
www.bmsworldmission.org/flallan

Prayer Letter April 2008

Dear Friends,

We are aware that it has been a long time since we last wrote to you. We apologise for the gap and hope that this letter finds you all well. We look forward to hearing your news and prayer requests.

The last year has been a full one for us. As you will know, we spent over three months on home assignment last summer and it was great to meet up with many of you. Unfortunately, we could not get round everybody and we are sorry if you are one of those that we missed. The internet is a wonderful invention and we managed to traverse the country by public transport booked well in advance from Bangladesh. We are also grateful for the many kindnesses shown to us during our travels.

We returned to Bangladesh last September and it has pretty much been non-stop since. As well as our roles within the hospital, we've supported electives, a BMS Medical Team and other visitors; humiliated ourselves at the church's sports day probably due, at least in part, to the huge amount of food we ate over the Christmas period; holidayed in Thailand; attended a women's retreat in Dhaka led by Jackie Pullinger (Fiona); become more involved with the local churches; thrown ourselves into community life; helped our new American neighbours settle in; and much, much more. During this busy time, we have had both joys and challenges, some of which we would like to share with you now.

Fiona

I really enjoyed our time in the UK but am delighted to be back in Bangladesh for our second term. At this point in our lives, it is our home and we are committed to our life and purpose here. We should have known better than to have returned in September, but somehow we survived and we relished the cooler, drier days of winter which followed. So much has happened since we got back and we quickly re-immersed ourselves into the community, language, culture and work.

They worshipped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity – all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved.
(Acts 3: 46-47, NLT)



For me, the most exciting aspect of our return has been the development of what we call our "eating ministry" – apparently, the official name is a "presence ministry". Over the last six months, we have been invited to share in various religious and cultural celebrations, as well as general invitations to "cha-nasta" (tea and snacks). We've laughed, listened, eaten, commiserated, prayed, sat, talked, played, hugged and shared hopes and fears. I was even given the responsibility and joy of naming a friend's baby girl – choosing Bella which means beautiful, God's promise and devoted to God in English and day in Bangla. It has been a wonderful privilege to spend so much time with people and to be invited to share in their lives. In addition, it has been a good opportunity to share Jesus' love with friends, old and new. We hope that our ministry of presence will continue to grow - at work, in the church and among those who live in the wider community.

"Bringing up a girl is like watering a plant in someone else's courtyard." Indian folk saying

Living in such a different culture, however, comes with a price. Most of the time, that price is manageable and I carry on as normal. Occasionally, it hits me full in the face. Since our return, I have been particularly conscious of the cost of being a woman in a traditional conservative society.

Gender inequality is a worldwide issue, both in developed and developing countries. It is an issue that has been close to my heart since primary school, where I was not allowed to programme the class video

recorder because I was a girl. I knew that in coming to Bangladesh, my gender would at times be a barrier to my work and that I would have to make changes to my lifestyle. I have done this willingly, for as the apostle Paul says, "When I am with those who are oppressed, I share their oppression so that I might bring them to Christ." (1 Corinthians 9: 22a, NLT). In spite of my efforts, I have often been judged and found wanting as a woman, a wife and a worker. This gives me the opportunity to stand in solidarity and understanding alongside local women and girls for whom gender inequality is a very real issue. Yet, it can be a difficult and painful place to stand. As we shared with our supporting churches, it is often not so much a case of humbling ourselves, as being humbled!

Please pray for:

- ◆ our outreach within the church and community – may people come to know how much Jesus loves them.
- ◆ the women of Bangladesh who “hold up half the sky”, often in difficult circumstances (based on a Chinese proverb).

Les

When we tell people that we live in their country they are surprised and tell us we must have “onek koshto” – lots of trouble. Yet, I can honestly say that this isn't how I view my life here. I love the generosity that Bangladeshis show in spite of their material poverty; I enjoy the celebrations which mark both religious occasions and rites of passage; the food is delicious; and I appreciate the way in which spirituality is so much a part of everyday life (even when it keeps me awake all night!).

Relationships are really important here and I have got to know more people at a deeper level than I ever did in the UK. But for me, my relationship with God has profited the most from being in Bangladesh. Through desire and necessity, I have done more Bible reading and praying. Studying a Spurgeon's College module, reading devotional books, listening to Christian music, thinking (meditating is too grand) and seeing the world of the Bible in day-to-day life have brought me closer to the One who created me, rescued me and continues to work in me.

All of this culminated in my first effort at 'preaching' at a prayer meeting in our home last month (in English – I promise to do it in Bangla next time). For a long time, God has been putting a message of unity and reconciliation on our hearts and, on this occasion, I felt brave enough to express it. Differences of class, ethnicity and politics, particularly church politics, have left the local Christian community hurt and scarred. A church that is not at peace with itself cannot witness to the Prince of Peace. My message was a simple one of fellowship and togetherness as the body of Christ and was well

received. It will not fix the problem but I hope it is a seed that will bear fruit in the hearts of some and that they will seek peace with their brothers and sisters.

One area where there is “koshto” is in my work life. As a teacher, I was used to being in charge of my own workload; working in a dynamic, varied and challenging environment; and engaging with a range of people. Here, I have struggled with having to wait for tasks to be delegated to me and have not found the work particularly challenging or fulfilling. Christians sometimes talk easily of being servants but I have found that a life of servanthood is a daily sacrifice, made to honour God and the people I am called to serve.

Please pray for:

- ◆ our continuing journey with God.
- ◆ reconciliation and growth within the local church.
- ◆ for me to undertake my work tasks as worship to God.

Jesus said, “If you love each other, everyone will know that you are my disciples.” (John 13: 35, CEV). Through our experiences here, we have learnt a great deal about the truth of this statement. We have come to understand that being is more important than doing. People notice, judge and will remember us by our character and Christians have the difficult task of reflecting Jesus' character to those around them. The relationships that we build, the way we talk to others, the daily small acts of kindness and the way we treat people mean a great deal. We have found that being a person of faith and demonstrating love is far more important than the job that we do. We, like many of you, are striving to understand how to be Christians and show Jesus' love in the society in which we live.

Please pray for:

- ◆ how we live out our faith in our everyday lives.
- ◆ patience, humility, endurance and a sense of humour as we face the challenges as well as the joys of serving overseas.

Peace and love,

Fiona. Les



PO Box 49 129 Broadway
Didcot Oxfordshire OX11 8XA
Tel: 01235 517700
Fax: 01235 517601

E-mail: prayer@bmsworldmission.org
Website: www.bmsworldmission.org/prayer

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