

Forgotten Something?

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by **Cameron Johnston** and **David Fell**.

It is now six months since 8:30am December 26 2004, when a Tsunami shook the world. Most of us were moved enough by it to offer financial help and prayer. But life has continued, and our attention has been diverted to new concerns, and in doing so we have largely forgotten the Tsunami lands.

What are your thoughts on the Tsunami now? How do you think the redevelopment process is going? When was the last time you prayed for the area, the survivors and the relief teams? If you are normal, your shock will have passed you won't think or pray about it much. Indeed, that response seems justified when we hear that some aid agencies are pulling out of the affected areas, believing their work to be done. We are given the impression that infrastructure is up and running again, and that people are getting their lives back to normal.

But for people living in the affected areas, their world will never be the same. They have daily reminders of the devastation as they ride their bikes and drive their cars past boats that are now on dry land hundreds of metres from the ocean. There are daily reminders of houses that no longer exist, of jobs in resorts no longer to be had, and of family that they will never go home to again. For many people, all hope was washed away at 8:30am December 26 2004.

As part of a Moore College Mission Team that went to Thailand in May this year, we had the amazing opportunity to go and visit the Tsunami affected areas of Khao Lak in the south of the country. We were the guests of an organisation called *We Love Thailand*, who coordinate a number of the Christian relief agencies working in and around Phuket (including *World Vision*, *Habitat For Humanity*, *Feeding the Hungry* and *YWAM*).

... but not really ...



Everything's back to normal ...

Thailand lost over 50,000 people to the Tsunami—a confronting figure that was even more shocking when we saw real lives and stories. We saw houses that should have been on land still in the water, and we saw boats that should have been in the water still on land. Walking through places that resembled new development sites, we replayed

images we had seen on the television in our minds, and shook our heads at what it must have been like. We were seeing the area at its cleaned-up best; but there were still



reminders in the dirt that people had once been holidaying there: bikini tops, sunscreen bottles, combs and suitcases, littered around as stark reminders of what was once a holiday destination, but which now looks more like a ghost town.

Television reports that up to 90% of one village were killed—some 3,000 people—are hard to comprehend. But that became real when we saw how few businesses had re-open, since there are no longer enough people to open them or support them. Some businesses had reopened in Khao Lak, but there were many more empty shop spaces. The only ‘tourists’ around were those who worked for international mission agencies to help restore the area.

Nights are worse and bring terror, as locals are afraid of spirits roaming streets and houses due

to the large number of dead who were unable to receive a proper burial. This fear even prevented people using newly renovated buildings. For example, we visited a newly established training centre run by an organisation called Operation Blessing. The purpose is to help train the locals in various languages and hospitality skills so when the tourists do return they will be employable by the hotels. A course was going to start in the evening, but no one wanted to join that course and chose instead to attend daylight courses. The reason given was a fear of spirits in the building at night.



Not only is the area spiritually affected, but there are also social problems arising from the Tsunami. The majority of those killed were women and children. Generally, the males were out fishing on their boats while the family remained at home. The wave



and surging water wiped out those at home, so the ratio of males to females is now five to one. As a consequence, stories of unrest and abuse are not uncommon. We also read in a Bangkok newspaper that a new high school being built had over 1000 students already on the enrolment list, 400 of whom were orphans.

However in all of the darkness there are organisations providing hope. *We Love Thailand* is one of these, which aims to show the people in Thailand the love of Christ through the work that they do in the affected areas. At present they have 67 different projects underway, ranging from building preschools and houses to boats and fishing nets. They mainly encourage the locals to do the work, providing them with materials and support.

Encouraging stories have resulted from their work. Not only have they been able to provide material hope, but also eternal hope. During the building of a preschool, a team of six Buddhist locals working on the project were converted. Simply through working alongside Christians, the locals were challenged by their actions and their interest in helping. One of the six even reads his Bible with his family and friends, and has started a small church in his house.

Just as we were challenged and encouraged by these stories, we also enjoyed seeing the practical outworking of people's faith. Young Christian women, as young as 17, straight out of highschool in the UK were Khao Lak using their 'gap' year to help in the preschool.

This area won't be the same again for many years. Although not all of us have the opportunity to help love our neighbour in such an immediate way as those young women, there are other ways that we can be of ongoing assistance. Indeed, such help is going to be needed for many years to come.

- Firstly, we can return to praying for the area. We can pray for victims, government officers and aid-workers as they seek to rebuild lives and communities. We can also pray that more opportunities to share the gospel will arise throughout the rebuilding process.
- Secondly, the area still needs financial support. We were informed at Christchurch Bangkok that the **Archbishop's of Sydney's Overseas Relief and Aid Fund** will meet any donation received specifically for tsunami work going on through Christchurch Bangkok. Why not click on the link below and make a donation while you think of it? You can also call the Fund on 1800 653 903.
- Thirdly, you could organise members of your church to sponsor a church in Thailand, to rebuild and encourage Christian support in the area.
- Finally, if you are able to spare a few weeks, the area needs people with a heart for others. In particular counsellors and teachers, both short and long term are required. Perhaps you could investigate the We Love Thailand website for yourself to find out more information (www.welovethailand.in.th)

It was a very challenging, confronting and encouraging few days of mission—a real mixed bag of emotions, which certainly left us thinking about how we can love these 'foreign' neighbours. Jesus reminds us a number of times to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength”, and to “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Mark 12:30-31). We found ourselves noticing how well we look after ourselves, but in relation to the tsunami, we had forgotten all the devastation. But having been there, we can not forget any more. These Thai neighbours are people we now plan not to forget to love.

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Further Resources:

Archbishop's of Sydney's Overseas Relief and Aid Fund.

Online: <https://www.archbishopsappeals.asn.au>

We Love Thailand, online: <http://www.welovethailand.in.th>

A report on *We Love Thailand*: http://www.relief.fhi.net/where_we_work/asia_tsunami/welovethailand_index.htm

“Praying thousands continue to dig deep for tsunami victims,” *Anglican Media* 7th Jan 2005:

http://www.sydneyanglicans.net/sydneystories/praying_thousands_continue_to_dig_deep_for_tsunami_victims

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