

Bangladesh: Keeping the Lights On



Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.

Over two years ago, the Rohingya people of Myanmar experienced one of the largest forced displacements of our time. Earlier this month, Week of Compassion Executive Director Rev. Vy Nguyen traveled to Bangladesh and Myanmar. His travels included a visit to the refugee camp in the Cox's Bazaar district. With nearly 1 million displaced residents, it is the largest, most densely

populated refugee camp in the world.

From the camp, the border to Myanmar is only about 100 yards away; and yet, many who live there cannot return home.

On Vy's recent trip to visit with partners, he met with many children and elders in the community to hear their stories. They told of their journeys and how much they left behind. All of them want to return home. All are frustrated with the uncertainty of the future and with the lack of livelihood opportunities; they took pride in their trades before displacement, but are now unable to work in the camps.

Vy reflects that "the situation is heartbreaking and challenging. I am grateful for our partners and for their important work here, each and every day. The camp is only 2 years old, but feels as though it may be here for years, if not decades. Our church partners are strategizing and collaborating on different phases of support-- from clean water and sanitation to psychosocial support and more. These families have a long journey ahead. Our partners will continue to walk with them and will share in their frustration as well as their hope for change. We all share the hope that they may return home soon."

While programming is significantly under-funded, our partners do the best that they can with the resources available to them. The camps are clean, well-organized, and provide accessible WASH (water, hygiene and sanitation) facilities to ensure the health and safety of the residents.

However, in the beginning when many first arrived, our partners noticed that many of the refugees didn't use the toilets at night. They would just walk outside and "take care of business" next to the tent. This was a significant health concern.

But the partners soon learned the reason: there were no lights in the camps at night. When they realized that the people felt unsafe walking to the toilet in the dark, our partners installed solar powered lights throughout the camps.

This was a simple solution. But it took time. More importantly, it took relationships. Week of Compassion works with partners around the world because having a physical presence in the community is priceless; it is the only way to truly understand and meet the needs of those we serve, and it also empowers communities to be safer and stronger--whatever the circumstances.

And this what our work together often amounts to: long-term accompaniment; listening and understanding; and sometimes, just keeping the lights on.

As Americans prepare to gather and give thanks with friends and family in the days ahead, we Disciples are mindful that there are many in the world for whom home, shelter, and security are uncertain; they long to be reunited with loved ones as well.

We prepare, too, for the beginning of the season of Advent, which starts this coming Sunday, December 1. It's a season for keeping the light: life that is the light of all people and light that gives life in real and tangible ways.

Isaiah 2:5 (one of Sunday's lectionary texts) says "Oh come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!" This call of the prophet dreams of the day when the people might "beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks." Week of Compassion and our global partners also pray for the day when human power struggles stop creating violence and displaced people everywhere might return home in peace and safety. Until then, we will keep the light that transforms suffering into hope; we will keep the light that makes a way in the darkness.

Photo: Week of Compassion

Thanks to our partners, children in the refugee camps in Bangladesh have clean, safe water

Mission

As the relief, refugee, and development mission fund of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Week of Compassion works with partners to alleviate suffering throughout the world.

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