

LAST LETTER FOR CHURCH NEWSLETTERS FROM SRI LANKA from Rosemary and James

At the moment we have well and truly entered into the LAST of everything phase here. Unlike in Circuit or Parish Ministry, it is not the last Ascension Day service or the last Church Council that features in the list of “lasts” but the last set of exam papers to mark, which for Rosemary involved hours of sitting with colleagues and having papers translated, or the last Faculty Meeting which for Rosemary means writing up the Minutes. On the church side, May 2nd was the last service at the Methodist Church at which Rosemary played the piano *and* preached; for her final HC service in June she has managed to persuade an Anglican to come and play for her. We are giving free rice and curry lunch after the service! James’s work is ongoing and he still has one more exam paper to set and mark – a re-take sometime in the week of June 20th. His work at the moment is largely related to this work as Development Officer and he is writing procedures and processes to help the ongoing work of the College. The new Principal is the Reverend Dr Jerome Sahabandhu, whom we both really like and think will be good, so long as he can get the necessary support from a beleaguered and depleted Faculty and from a new Administrative Officer whom James is hoping can be recruited before James leaves.

Please do not ask us if we are winding down! Neither of us are the sorts that do wind down, and although we had hoped when the Orientation Programme had ended on May 19th to get out and about around the island and stop work, James’s work is such that, rather than winding down, he has been winding up and is busier than ever. We also have to pack up our house – fortunately the furniture is not ours and belongs to the Methodist Church here for future Mission Partners, but we do have to pack up things for shipping – mostly lots of books, clothes, as well as other bits and pieces and of course leave the house in good order for whoever will live in here next! Plus we are now getting inundated with invitations to meals out with church and campus folks and we just cannot fit them all in.

Apart from our lovely weather (it is rather like an ideal June all the time here!) and the delicious fresh local fruits, wonderful wildlife (like the colourful kingfishers and parrots we see near our house, not to mention elephants in the streets) and beautiful tropical flowers, what will we miss? Of course it is hard to know, but we think it will be the contact and our relationships with the students. On the campus both of us are amongst the oldest, but of course when we return to church life in Britain, it will not be like that. When times have been tough here and things difficult, it is the students who have kept us going. Most of them we like very much indeed. Of course, inevitably, it is those with the best English with whom we have forged the closest bonds. Today (May 5th) we have been to our last Wedding of many here (usually former students) and as, on the whole, these services contain no English we cannot say that these will be amongst the things we will miss. However we will miss the beautiful colourful saris and other wonderful costumes.

On a more mundane level, when shopping last week, we bought our last large jar of marmite here!

It might surprise you that skills we have both acquired here are computing ones. James has learnt a lot about how computers work and how to mend them or detect problems. Rosemary sent her first ever email from Zambia some 10 years ago now and here she has learnt how to use a mobile phone, a digital camera and send photos by email, and generally because of all her admin work for the College, in her capacity as Faculty Secretary from 2006-10, she has become much more computer literate!

There are places we have not seen in Sri Lanka but we have been to most of the island – visiting former students has often been the focus of our travels. But one area that was significant in its absence from our list of places visited was the Jaffna Peninsular. It is still not easy for foreigners to get Ministry of Defence clearance to visit and even harder to get a permit to drive your own vehicle there. However, we were privileged to be able to do this 12-17 April. There were signs of destruction everywhere – bullet holes, headless statues and ruined buildings, as well as ruined lives. All the people we met had war stories and now for 11 months they have had peace for the first time for nearly 30 years. There was a general exhaustion and a real appreciation of peace – no-one we met even hinted that they might prefer to continue a fight. But freedom also brings a new set of problems.

There is peace - and that is good - but to the outsider it does not seem as if the Government and the Army are addressing the issues of justice for the Tamils. Unless that is done, it will not take long for another group to rise up. For example, in Kilinochchi, the HQ of the LTTE until Jan 2009, smashed buildings and empty shells of buildings and plain rubble are everywhere, and in the place where there was formerly a children’s play ground there is now a very prominent army monument on the main A9 road. Now it is full of Sinhalese tourists. In a Tamil heartland, how sensitive is that? If you can build an army memorial so quickly, why cannot you rebuild a playground for children and other things for the Community? In the meantime in Jaffna we were shown LTTE graveyards destroyed by the Army.

It was a poignant visit but we were so glad we had had the chance to go – several of students come from Jaffna and we had never seen their homeland.

People also ask us if we are looking forward to coming home. But for us home has been here at TCL for the last 5 years, and we have all the same feelings about leaving a place where we have been loved and have loved, as anyone does when moving. We will be happy to share more with you when we meet some of you on furlough.

Sadly there is no-one coming out to replace us – there is both a shortage of funds in all the mission agencies: the Methodist Church World Mission Fund, CWM, CMS, and USPG, as well as a shortage of vocations. We do urge you to continue your support of the World Church. We do still believe in cross-cultural exchanges and feel everyone is the winner: both the place that receives Mission Partners and the Mission Partners themselves.

We keep getting asked to stay on. The main reason we are returning is to be near Rosemary's elderly parents. This is a reason Sri Lankans understand and, in fact, they often sound surprised that Westerners care that much. One of their stereotypes is that people in the West do not care for their elderly relatives as much as they do here. We all have stereotypes about the other, and living and working in another culture challenges them. It has been an amazing 5 years which we would not have missed for anything.

Newsletter back copies are on our website together with a large number of pictures of our life in Sri Lanka: see www.rosemaryandjames.methodistchurch.co.uk.