



PRESBYTERIAN DISASTER ASSISTANCE

Author Donna Derr participated in an ecumenical visit to Banda Aceh, Indonesia, April 18-22, 2005. The following mission minute is her reflection from that trip.

Traveling with colleagues who were in Banda Aceh for the first time, I was reminded of how history and memory "color" the lens through which we see things. As we were traveling around the city and surrounding areas they could be heard remarking, "overwhelming — it is a miracle anyone survived destruction like this — I've never seen anything like it". Having been there a month earlier I, seeing the same landscape, was thinking, "remarkable what has been accomplished since I was last here". The memory of my earlier visit was my lens — and indeed much work in debris clean-up and removal and the re-opening of small businesses has occurred in just those 30 days. Landscape has been altered in many areas, but now many pieces of land are large open spaces, free of debris and freshly raked — in many ways barren acres that are a stark testament to what existed and was lost.

The markets were noisy, aromatic and full, a reminder that routine — the daily events that define our lives — is returning and a part of the healing process for the residents of Banda Aceh.

Many internally displaced persons are beginning to move into temporary "barracks" structures that have been built — not perhaps happily, but with the resignation of knowing that even

these facilities are a better option than living in a tent. Permanent house construction is yet far down the road as reconstruction plans and policies at the government level are still just beginning to be defined.

My grandmother was one who reminded us often that nurturing hope, even in the midst of some of our darkest times, was not just important, but was, well...necessary...if our journey forward was to have meaning. I came face to face with the memory of my grandmother in Banda Aceh — in the persons of the woman and her husband who we have hired to help with meal preparation and cleaning at our office. She and her husband, a fisherman, lived in a small home near the ocean. Their two sons were ages four and eight.

Her husband was out with his fishing crew the day of the earthquake and tsunami. As the tsunami descended, she tried to outrun it with her eight-year-old tied to her back in a shawl and her four-year-old, who was disabled, in her arms. Her eight-year-old was the first to be lost — pulled off her back by the force of the water. Trying to swim with her four-year-old as the wave pulled her inland, she was finally carried in far enough that she could find something to hold on to until the wave receded. Her four-year-old

had died in her arms, drowning as she was trying to swim inland. She shared with my colleagues there how she then walked into central Banda Aceh and eventually, with a friend, took her son to a burial area and with their hands they dug the grave in which he was buried. Her husband returned home from his day of fishing to this scene of total devastation, not indeed knowing what had happened until he and his returning workers met some "wandering" survivors who told them of what had occurred.

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Two weeks later he located his wife at a shelter and they were reunited. As I had a few moments to talk to him, at one point he talked about the way forward — his hope that he and his wife could make enough money working that in the next year they could build a small house — "not near the water this time," and maybe "we will have more children — I will tell them stories about their brothers". *Hope lives*, I could hear my grandmother whispering in my mind. Indeed, in the midst of all the continuing dislocation, trauma and struggle forward — hope does reside in and among the people of Banda Aceh, as evidenced each day they move forward.



OUT OF CHAOS, HOPE