

The Tsunami's Wake: a Tale of Generous and Creative Love

By Kenneth Gavin SJ

A year ago this December 26, the world was overwhelmed by the devastation caused by the tsunami in Southeast Asia. Throughout the region over 200,000 people perished in a matter of moments and more than a half million survivors were left without home or livelihood to mourn their lost loved ones. Two of the areas hardest hit by the tsunami were Sri Lanka and Aceh in northern Indonesia, where recent civil conflicts had already caused massive displacement of peoples.

Ironically, Jesuit Refugee Service teams had already been on the ground in both places for a number of years, accompanying and serving war-affected families who had been forced from their homes by strife within these countries. The truth is that JRS does not normally find itself involved in emergency relief situations that follow natural disasters. But, given the scarcity of non-governmental organizations able to respond to the immediate needs of Sri Lankan and Acehnese victims, JRS became part of a set of key local groups both trusted by the victims and capable of developing a swift response to the tragedy.

It is important that we take stock of the amazing response of the Jesuit world to the many people whose lives were changed forever by the tsunami. Just last summer I visited the tsunami-affected regions of Sri Lanka and Aceh with a JRS/USA staff member, Armando Borja, and a member of our board of directors, Richard Kelly. While in Aceh we were deeply moved by a meeting with a villager from the small coastal town of Krueng Raya. He had lost both his mother and sister in the tragic tsunami. "Finally after six months," he told us, "I can speak of how the tsunami destroyed our village. The deepest pain of that day has now left my heart. But I will never, never forget that morning!" And then he described how the

monster wave had swept his family members away and had left his once thriving fishing village little more than a heap of rubble. Throughout this past year, JRS has not forgotten the depth of pain endured by the people of Southeast Asia. It has reached out and helped thousands of forcibly displaced people come to cope with their pain and to rebuild their lives.

JRS teams in Sri Lanka and Aceh are engaged in grassroots interreligious ventures, bringing together Muslims, Hindus and Christians, lay people and religious, Jesuits and diocesan priests in the service of those displaced by the tragedy. For example, in the midst of responding to the basic, post-tsunami needs of victims for food, shelter and provisions, JRS-Sri Lanka trained more than 100 teachers to serve as "barefoot counselors" who visited the survivors in their tents and temporary shelters. Their role was to accompany them and help them cope with the overwhelming loss and trauma they experienced. Likewise, JRS-Aceh was one of the first relief teams to arrive with help for the residents of Pulo Aceh, an isolated island community three hours' distance by boat from the mainland. The bonds of relationship forged by JRS with this Muslim community were so deep that, when other organizations arrived to help them, the island's residents told them that they could not accept their assistance without consulting JRS, who had become their "father" during this tragic period.

Even today, nearly a year after the tsunami, JRS is actively responding to the many needs of survivors. Teams in Sri Lanka and Aceh reach out to children through educational and counseling programs at the preschool, primary and secondary levels. They train women to develop income-generating trades of sewing and tailoring, and they provide boats and nets for fishermen who lost the tools of their trade to the tsunami's waters. JRS continues to help build permanent housing for



Photos courtesy of JRS/USA

Thousands of fishermen in Aceh lost their boats and nets in last year's tsunami. JRS and other agencies worked hard to build and distribute boats to these fishermen so that they can return to fishing and once again provide income for their families.

families and to provide them with much needed health care.

Last January, at the request of the JRS directors in Southeast Asia, JRS/USA inaugurated a Tsunami Relief Appeal, urging U.S. Jesuit provinces, universities, colleges, schools, parishes and retreat houses to reach out to the survivors. As the major outreach arm for refugee ministry of the U.S. Assistancy, we at JRS/USA knew that we wanted to play a role, however small, in responding to this tragedy and to the work of JRS in the tsunami-affected regions. At first we imagined that we could raise \$250,000, but the generosity of our Jesuit donors far exceeded our initial estimate. In fact, during the past year, JRS/USA received over \$1.75 million in donations for tsunami victims in Sri Lanka and Aceh! These funds are currently being used to ensure that survivors are housed, that children are educated, and that parents have livelihoods to support their families' daily needs.

Jesuit-related donors contributed more than 60 percent of the funds raised. Nine provinces, 44 Jesuit communities, 20 colleges and universities, 29 high schools, 2 elementary schools, 17 parishes and 3 retreat houses made donations totaling \$1,087,534.

These funds were raised in a wide variety of ways that underscores the generosity and creativity of those who contributed. Some provinces canvassed their own donors and forwarded their donations to JRS/USA. The University of Santa Clara sent out an appeal to every member of the university community while Creighton University raised funds during the half-time of a Bluejay basketball game. Fairfield University's Campus Ministry program stimulated contributions by offering student donors white wristbands embossed with "Jesuit Refugee Service Tsunami Relief." The donation

Jesuit-Related Tsunami Donations to JRS/USA Tsunami Appeal		
Jesuit provinces	9	\$535,840.04
Jesuit communities	44	\$121,564.00
Jesuit colleges, universities	20	\$163,140.30
Jesuit high schools, middle and elementary schools	31	\$179,143.02
Jesuit parishes	17	\$74,442.36
Jesuit retreat houses	3	\$3,405.00
Other	1	\$10,000.00
Total Jesuit-Related Donations		\$1,087,534.72

from Loyola School in New York City represented contributions from every student in the school! Even elementary students from Gesu School in Philadelphia generously reached out to help the victims of the tsunami.

The mission of JRS is integral to the mission of the Society of Jesus and to its many ministries. As both Frs. Arrupe and Kolvenbach often noted, its service to refugees and displaced peoples is an apostolic commitment of the whole Society. The simple truth about JRS, as its charter underscores, is that to accompany refugees and forcibly displaced persons "is to affirm that God is present in human history, even in most tragic episodes." In responding so generously and creatively to the needs of the tsunami victims, the Jesuits of the U.S. and their many constituencies have clearly committed themselves to the care of the most vulnerable among us. Let us continue to accompany refugees and displaced peoples, modeling ourselves on the Lord Jesus who as an infant fled with his family into exile.

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JRS teams in Aceh have utilized a unique model of replacement homes with a design from a Jesuit technological school in Indonesia. These structures minimize the use of wood which is scarce in northern Aceh. The hundreds of homes built by JRS are designed to be earthquake resistant and to last more than 40 years.