

# The tsunami hits, the church responds! An in-depth case study from South India

## 1. Summary

Two branches of the local church, with contrasting theologies and separate organisational structures, worked together during the first five days of a sudden-onset disaster to alleviate people's physical, emotional and spiritual suffering. This case study will show how they used their distinctive competencies and resources to meet the communities' needs.

## 2. What level of intervention is this case study focused on?

This case study focuses on interventions made at village, district and state levels.

## 3. Who could be prospective users of the approach modelled in this case study?

Christian and secular NGOs, both international and local, that find themselves working with a church that has a strong presence and influence in the affected community. Users might also be the development departments of church denominations.

## 4. Problem addressed

At 9am on Sunday 26 December 2004, a tidal wave (tsunami) hit, amongst many places, the coastal belt of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Kottar, Kanyakumari District, in Tamil Nadu, south India. Settlements on the low-lying areas of 35 fishing villages were severely damaged: an estimated 846 people died; 1,525 fishing boats and 5,257 houses were destroyed. Within hours, a peaceful Sunday morning scene turned into one of complete chaos, grief and bewilderment.

The tsunami affected a far wider area than the state of Tamil Nadu. Three other south Indian states were hit: Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Pondicherry, as well as the Union Territories of Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The tsunami impacted a total of 12 countries and claimed an estimated 300,000 lives.

## 5. Purpose of the intervention

The Catholic Church/ Salvation Army response aimed to meet people's immediate needs in the wake of the tsunami: for rescue and medical help, for burial and counselling services, and for the provision of food and shelter.

## 6. Context

Francis Xavier, founder of the Jesuit Order of the Roman Catholic Church, landed in Kanyakumari District in 1450. Since then, the fishing communities on this coastal belt have become 99 per cent Roman Catholic, with 41 churches serving a population of 160,000. These fishing communities are from one caste, the Mukkuvar. For centuries, the Catholic Church has been the focal point of their religious, social and cultural life. Although the Catholic Church is strong in the coastal belt, its influence is not quite as dominant in interior parts of the state, where Christians from other denominations as well as Hindus and Muslims also live.

The Salvation Army set up its base in Nagercoil, the district headquarters of Kanyakumari District in 1885. Today it runs a 300-bed hospital a few miles from the coast. The Army has 195 corps (or churches) in the District, with about 70,000 members.

The government has clear structures in place in the affected communities. Since Kanyakumari is at the southern-most tip of India, it is also a place of tourism and religious pilgrimage.

## 7. History and process

Since 1963, the Diocese of Kottar has had a development department called the Kottar Social Service Society (KSSS). The KSSS office is in the compound of the bishop's house in Nagercoil. KSSS has an executive director, nine departments and approximately 60 staff. It receives development proposals from parish priests and their parish councils.

## Case studies in depth

These parish councils are made up of representatives from 'Basic Christian Communities' (BCC), to which all families in a parish belong. There is one BCC representative for every 30 families. On the parish council there are also representatives of Pious Associations, men and women who have an allegiance to one of the Catholic saints and who carry out prayer and spiritual ministries in the community. The parish priest is president of the parish council, as well as being correspondent or chairman of all the Catholic schools in the parish at primary, middle and secondary levels. Parish councils also maintain a fund called Oor Pannam, meaning 'village money'. This is added to weekly through church offerings on Sundays, contributions from catches of fish and income from the lease of the community hall for weddings and functions. The Catholic Church structure dominates the social and religious life of the fishing communities, much as the church building dominates the landscape.

Besides running the hospital, the Salvation Army also has an extensive community health and development programme with 70 medical and support staff and 1,000 volunteers working in 370 villages in two districts, though before the tsunami none was working in the affected communities.

Before disaster hit, there was no work carried out jointly by the Catholic Church and the Salvation Army, although parish priests referred sick parishioners to the Salvation Army hospital and the Salvation Army had held medical camps in these coastal villages. The Catholic Church has its own 100-bed hospital; the government runs one with 400 beds.

### 8. Steps in implementation

#### **26 December 2004, Day 1. Rescue, comfort**

At 9am, the first tidal wave hit the coast. Half an hour later, the Bishop of Kottar was informed by phone of what had happened. He immediately took a vehicle to the coast with the Director of KSSS. The Bishop visited more than 20 affected villages in his diocese, before returning to Nagercoil at 6pm. At 2pm the Bishop ordered the KSSS director back to Nagercoil to organise an emergency response.

The director met, among others, officials from the Salvation Army, who pledged whatever support it could give to the Catholic community. The Army's ambulance was used to transport dead bodies to the government hospital. The parish priests helped with search and rescue but later in the day began to organise people, through the parish councils, to move into church buildings or onto community grounds away from the sea.

Meanwhile, the Salvation Army had ordered food to be cooked in its five hostels and four child development centres in Nagercoil. This food was delivered, along with the necessary utensils, to three coastal sites by 6pm, to feed 3,000 people. The KSSS director sent messages to the Catholic youth associations in the diocese, asking for volunteers for relief and rescue work. He also organised the priests who live and work in the Bishop's compound into an emergency relief committee.

#### **27 December, Day 2. Food distribution, burials**

The parish priests began the day as usual with mass at 6.15am and then started to organise burial services. The Salvation Army continued with its feeding programme and worked alongside the government to distribute clothes and blankets. The parish councils set up their own cooking facilities and organised transport for people to be taken to the river to bathe. Over 100 youth volunteers arrived at KSSS headquarters with friends from all religious backgrounds, in response to the KSSS director's request for help. They were sent out to help search for the dead and begin the clean-up.



#### **28 December, Day 3. Clothes distributed and political leaders called**



Burial services continued. The distribution of clothes and other materials took place, alongside the feeding programme. The Bishop called a meeting of local politicians on the Bishop's compound in Nagercoil; seven members of the Legislative Assembly and one Member of Parliament attended. The Collector, the most senior civil servant in the district, also came. However, he was relieved of his post later that day, after protests involving 3,000 fishermen were organised by the Kanyakumari Parish Council, against what they considered to be a poor response from the government. This led to the appointment of a more effective successor.

### **29 December, Day 4. NGOs meeting called**

In the absence of the Collector and with prompting from the Salvation Army, the Bishop called a meeting of all the NGOs that had arrived by then from across India and the world. One hundred people attended the meeting, which took place in the Bishop's compound. They met every day for the next 15 days. After a month, the NGOs persuaded the new Collector to organise the meetings and not the Catholic Church. From Day 4, the Salvation Army sent non-cooked food to the camps, as the parish council cooking facilities were now properly in place. The Salvation Army then carried out a survey of the losses in Kanyakumari and Kadiapattinam villages, at the request of parish priests. Also, 15 counsellors from its HIV/AIDS programme were sent to the villages.

### **30 December, Day 5. Religious leaders called**

The Bishop summoned to his house all religious leaders from the state – Hindus, Muslims and Protestant groups – and encouraged them to raise funds and allocate them to affected communities. Their contributions were very generous. At the NGO forum that day, the Bishop allocated villages to each NGO. Kanyakumari and Kadipattanam villages were officially allocated to the Salvation Army.

## 9. Duration

The response focus of this case study has been limited to the first five days of rescue and relief. The actual response of both the Catholic Church and the Salvation Army has however continued for over three years through rehabilitation, resettlement, livelihood and health interventions.

## 10. Resources required

### **Material resources**

#### **The Catholic Church:**

- The church, school and community buildings set aside to shelter displaced people.
- Local funds available for immediate use – Oor Pannam or 'village money'.
- Access to resources through KSSS, the development wing of the Catholic Church, and also from the Catholic Church worldwide.

#### **The Salvation Army:**

- A 300-bed hospital, with all its facilities as well as skilled medical personnel.
- A community outreach programme.
- An ambulance and other vehicles.
- Access to 200,000 rupees in the first week of the disaster.
- Food and utensils stored in the hostels and child day care centres.

### **Competencies (sets of skills working together towards an effective end)**

#### **The Catholic Church:**

- Well-defined social and spiritual roles, as set out in the parish council system.
- The role of KSSS.

#### **The Salvation Army:**

- A senior member from the Salvation Army Community Development and Health Programme was on the board of KSSS, and so was able to bring together knowledge and see opportunities for both organisations to work together.
- Fifteen counsellors from the HIV/AIDS unit.
- Hostel cooks.

### **Other resources**

#### **The Catholic Church:**

- The spiritual authority of the Bishop and priests to comfort survivors and bury the dead.
- The political authority of the parish priest to gather together resources for the relief effort in his capacity as president of the parish council and correspondent of the schools and to mobilise 3,000 people to protest against a poor government response to the tsunami.
- The status of the Bishop that enabled him to call meetings of politicians, the NGO community and other religious leaders, and to ask them for assistance.
- The authority of the parish priest over his community, which meant that all NGOs liaised with him and the parish council when working in the parish.

#### **The Salvation Army:**

- Credibility, built up over many years' service in the community with poor and sick people, including Catholics. This made the Salvation Army's offer of help on the first day immediately acceptable to KSSS.
- Trust, by which front-line Salvation Army staff felt able to commit significant resources to the Catholic relief effort verbally, without first having to confirm a budget with Army Headquarters.

## 11. Indicators for monitoring

### Advocacy

- Degree of community proactiveness in challenging inadequate responses to the relief situation by the government

### Networking

- Degree of participation of NGOs in networks and co-ordination mechanisms set up by the Catholic Church
- Level of support received from other religious communities

### Project

The speed and effectiveness of the following:

- Rescue, comfort and burials
- Medical support and treatment for the injured
- Clearing up
- Distribution of food acceptable to the communities
- Distribution of blankets and clothing
- Counselling support

## 12. Impact

### On the communities affected

- They felt supported spiritually and emotionally by the Catholic Church at a time of great need and distress.
- Their basic needs for shelter, protection and food were met in the days following the tsunami, as the Catholic Church and the Salvation Army worked together to ensure that end.

### On the Catholic Church

- The interventions enhanced the already influential position of the clergy (parish priest and Bishop) in the community.
- The parish council validated its role as an effective body through which to organise relief. It gained skills, experiences and established connections with outside bodies that it had not known previously.

### On the Salvation Army

- Its reputation was enhanced in the eyes of the Catholic Church, the community and the government, validating its sense of purpose and mission, summed up in its motto: 'Where there is a need, there is the Salvation Army'.
- It learned much about disaster response.

### On the Government

- It initially lost credibility in comparison to the effective response of the churches, but recovered once it began to respond to the concerns articulated through the protests.

## 13. Challenges

### The Catholic Church

- The demands the people made of it to provide for its 'flock'. Whereas the NGOs were allocated specific villages, the church had to respond to all those affected and just did not have the capacity or resources to do so.
- The struggle priests had to resist the pressure from those who had not suffered but demanded aid. They did not always resist that pressure.
- The pain they felt, especially the Bishop, when they were accused incorrectly of hoarding money for themselves.
- The task of organising other NGOs in the absence of a proactive government.

### Salvation Army

- Having to learn quickly about relief work.
- Close collaboration with another organisation, especially one that was theologically and organisationally so different from itself.
- Being accused of not caring properly for its own members, when so much of its time was taken up with working with the Catholic community.

### Resource co-ordination

- Co-ordinating the significant resources involved - buildings, compounds, hospital beds, hostel equipment, cooks, food, vehicles, counsellors, priests, and finance from local, district, national and international sources - to ensure an effective relief response.

## 14. Critical issues and lessons learnt

- Whilst the tsunami directly affected some in the community but not others, the parish system assumes that the Catholic Church takes responsibility for everyone. It is therefore crucial to work out how to use a fair system of distribution that meets the needs of the people worst affected, without alienating those from the same community who are not affected.
- Church ministers and priests need to follow a common and unbiased decision-making process when distributing relief. They need the full support of their superiors and colleagues on the parish council when making difficult decisions.

## Case studies in depth

- Good relationships between Christian organisations in a locality must be developed. In this case the Catholics and the Salvation Army had this and it enabled them to move ahead rapidly at critical points when important decisions, especially around resource allocation, had to be made.
- Co-operation between two bodies can be greatly helped by a common motivation and ideology. In this case, the Catholic Church and the Salvation Army shared a common faith commitment to serve Jesus Christ through serving the poor. This was a powerful binding force.
- An effective relief response requires complementary roles and resources to be applied to meet needs as they present themselves:
- In this case the Catholic parish structure meant that it had influence on other types of organisations, whether humanitarian, political or religious.
- The Salvation Army offered specialised inputs of service provision, as well as the relevant expertise that it channelled through the parish council system.
- There are significant resources that a local church presence can mobilise immediately, including buildings, compounds, cooks, food, vehicles, counsellors, priests and some local finance.
- Front-line workers should be entrusted and empowered to make key promises and decisions in the early days of a sudden onset disaster, and regional and international superiors should support them as far as possible. If such promises are not kept, credibility is soon lost.
- Local churches should be trained in disaster preparedness. If the churches had known to educate their members about the warning signs of a tsunami, or had an early warning system using the church bells to alert people to danger, many more lives could have been saved.

### 15. Potential for replication

The approach outlined in this case study can best be replicated in contexts where:

- there is a strong parish structure and a predominantly Christian community.
- the service provider is trusted by the parish authorities.
- the service provider has access to facilities, expertise and resources to match the need.

### 16. Sources of information

#### 1. The Salvation Army

- Mr. G. Benjamin Dhaya, Director, The Salvation Army CHDP, Catherine Booth Hospital, Nagercoil -629001, Kanayakumari District, Tamil Nadu, South India

#### 2. The Catholic Church

- Fr G. Joseph Romald, Executive Director, KSSS, Bishop's House, Nagercoil -629001, Kanyakumari District, India
- Fr Leon S. Henson, Parish Priest, Church of Our Lady of Ranson, Kayakumari District, India

#### 3. Tearfund

- Rachel Stevens, Projects Officer, Tsunami Response Team, Tearfund
- Prince David, Country Representative, India, Tearfund

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