

BANGLADESH REVISITED 2017.

Since first arriving in Bangladesh in September 1977 to work with the Church of Bangladesh as an agriculturist and later also as a Youth Worker and spending 6 years in the country, I have made a number of visits, both private and official. The official ones included taking people from Scotland on projects where we built two rudimentary houses, helped build a church, and paint a school and in 2015 to build a road. Also as Asia Convener I made a number of visits to church projects, as well as spending 10 weeks study leave (which included the consecration of my good friend Paul as Bishop of Kushtia) and also in 2009 attending the consecration of Sunil as his successor when Paul moved from Kushtia to Dhaka.

Since retiring in June 2017 after 28 years as minister of Carnoustie Panbride Church, I have recently returned from 6 weeks in Bangladesh where I visited many of the places where I worked and although it was a busy programme, I achieved my aim of seeing as many of my friends as possible.

40 years ago, Dhaka was a reasonably large city, but relatively easy to travel around. The city has significantly expanded, and is extremely difficult to travel around. It seems that no matter what time of day you want to travel, traffic jams are the norm. When I went to visit what was the “new” centre in Magh Bazar, instead of the wide pleasant New Eskaton Road of old, there is a gigantic concrete flyover right down the middle of the street. There are motorcycles for sale, and car repair shops the whole length now, and even small shops beneath the underpass.

A new experience was being taken by Bishop Michael’s family to – Pizza Inn! Well, it made a change from rice! Fast food shops are everywhere – BFC – Bangladesh Fried Chicken, Burger shops, as well as very upmarket fashion shops, and a surprise to me, selling western type fashions for ladies. I visited Computer City with a friend – a huge building over 6 floors, with 100s of shops, filled with everything you could ever need in the digital age.

On my last week, I was staying one night with a friend in the church centre at Savar. On the Monday morning three of us made a short bus journey to visit the Martyrs Memorial. This was a few days before the visit of Pope Francis, and there was a notice saying the monument was closed until after his visit. This being Bangladesh, my friend called over to a policeman behind the gates and asked if “this very important visitor from Scotland could possibly get in to see the monument”! After a discussion with his superior officer, the three of us were allowed in. Representatives of the army, navy and air force were in rehearsals for the Pope’s visit, and just as we were approaching they had a break and headed for some shade. I have this amazing photo of their helmets which they left in position – as well as their rifles! Only in Bangladesh! Where Matthew goes, the Pope follows!

Another aspect of life now which I had difficulty with because of the contrast, was the significant number of women now wearing the full burkha, including black gloves and socks, as well as the number of younger women wearing the hijab, often brightly coloured. There are also many new mosques of elaborate proportions, many of them tiled on the outside. This is not only in Dhaka, but in some of the more isolated areas as well. But there was a contrast with the more western hairstyles and fashions worn by some.

Of course the main reason for my visit was to catch up with friends, and there were many wonderful reunions – and I met others whom I didn’t think I would see. I was met with wonderful generosity and some amazing food! And at breakfast and some evening meals the most amazing chapatis. I met a number of the boys from the children’ homes I worked in, including Francis in Naogaon where I was based for 3 years, He now has a good going business in a shop just outside the mission compound. He insisted in treating me to a cup of coffee, and I have to say it was the best coffee I tasted throughout the 6 weeks – it normally costs the equivalent of 8p but he would take any money – “You were my sir!” He was in Primary 2 when he first came to the home, and he told me that he first met me at the Sunday Morning service (he had arrived late on Saturday night with his father) – and he remembers being astonished when I said to him after the service “You must be Francis”. He has never forgotten that I knew his name.

There were many occasions over the 6 weeks, when some of the boys recalled things which I had forgotten about, but which had meant something to them. It was good to catch up with some of the boys from the homes – one is now a Bishop, two are parish priests, one is a teacher of Bengali in a government school, another is parish secretary. Sadly I learned that some of them had died. Two of my greatest friends in Naogaon had died since my last visit in 2012, but it was lovely to be with their families for a short time, although there were also tears.

Sadly, many of the hostels have closed down because funding was stopped and there is concern for the future leadership in the church, since many of those in leadership positions are the product of the hostel system. However, it is hoped that small beginnings can again be made with local partnerships rather than overseas ones.

I had the greatest of privileges during these 6 weeks, of meeting so many committed and caring people whose generosity is second to none. During my ministry in Carnoustie Panbride, it was always accepted that the church is not a building, but a people. It was wonderful to see that in Bangladesh – the people I met are people of deep faith, despite the sometimes difficult situations as a minority.

I will be forever grateful for the love and kindness which was shown to me, by truly remarkable people.

Matthew S Bicket

7th December 2017.