

Bangladesh

Challenges for prayer:

The cycle of poverty will perpetuate itself until fundamental changes occur. Pray for long-term, penetrating transformation in the following areas of desperate need:

a) *The economy is sorely underdeveloped.* Bangladesh has little infrastructure, very few natural resources, and therefore affords few ways of making an income. Most people work in agriculture or textiles for scandalously low wages. The majority of Bangladeshis live in gripping poverty, with a very small wealthy minority.

b) *A solid social foundation* for progress is lacking. Education levels are low (but improving), and overpopulation creates problems in a nation already wanting in land, resources and employment opportunities. Women have been the backbone of micro-credit success (80% of households participate in benefits from micro-credit), yet often suffer undignified and inequitable treatment.

c) *A frightening vulnerability* to changes in climate and economy. With such widespread poverty, a large proportion of income is spent on food. Significant rises in food prices have a devastating effect, but not as devastating as the effect of flooding from swollen rivers and monsoons. With alarming regularity, the nation is made to endure tragic loss of life and property.

The political situation offers little hope for significant change and seems a venue for feuding between two very wealthy clans rather than a means to improving the lot of the poor majority. Many see Bangladeshi democracy as merely lip service to Western ideals in order to secure aid. Corruption is endemic and deeply rooted. Pray for governance that is just, transparent and effective at assisting those in need while thwarting those seeking to gain at the expense of the nation.

Religious discrimination and tension is rising. Islamists, while a small minority, exert increasing pressure for governance by shari'a principles. Minority groups, even Muslim ones, find themselves vulnerable. Christians, Buddhists and especially Hindus suffer as persecution intensifies, occasionally to the point of destruction of property and sometimes even death. Forced reconversion to Islam is an increasing threat. Since independence, the percent of the population comprising minority sections of society has been reduced to half. Pray for binding of the powers of darkness operating in religious, social and ethnic realms. Pray also that the constitutional freedom allowing all to practise and propagate their own religions might be maintained.

The churches have been growing faster than the population rate for the last 50 years. Pray specifically for:

a) *The people-movement tribal churches.* Significant church growth (greater than 10% evangelical) has occurred among the following peoples: Santal, Munda, Khasi, Garo, Maramei, Ralte, Mizo, Poi. Another 18 groups have more than 5% evangelicals and multiplying churches. Pray that these churches may become strong and full of vision for mission.

b) *The churches among sections of the Hindu population.* The majority of indigenous

believers have traditionally been from a Hindu background, and usually from the less populous and lower caste peoples. The ill-treatment of Hindus in Bangladesh has made them more amenable to the gospel.

c) *Believers from a Muslim background.* There are tens of thousands who now call on Jesus as Lord, but a wider breakthrough awaits. Some have found Christ through highly contextualized “Jesus mosques”, others through relational networks, even visions and dreams. Pray for these fledgling movements with such staggering potential to grow, spread and mature.

The Church has many needs, the greatest of which is spiritual awakening. Pray that the Holy Spirit will move in these areas:

a) *Nominal Christianity.* Early people movements brought thousands from marginalized sections of society into the Church. Poverty, illiteracy and lack of trained, godly leadership led to shallowness and nominalism.

b) *Unity.* Imported and indigenous divisions hinder the Church’s witness to other faiths and make it easier to legislate against and intimidate Christians. Pray for the National Christian Fellowship of Bangladesh as it encourages evangelical unity and cooperative action in evangelism, teaching and aid programmes.

c) *Outreach.* After years of little interest, there is growing involvement in reaching out to others with the gospel. This marks a major transition in the national Church.

d) *Finance.* Christians generally come from lower classes and castes, which, together with their minority faith, limits employment opportunities. This can create a situation of perpetual dependency on foreign aid. National Christian workers are sometimes drawn by the much-needed salary more than the desire to serve. Pray for means by which believers and churches may be self-sustaining.

Leadership for the churches is much needed. Many pastors minister while holding down full-time jobs. A lack of resources limits the number of not only full-time ministers, but also full-time theological students. Pray for creative and responsible methods of offering relevant instruction. Spiritually mature lay leaders are also in short supply; pray for both renewal and training opportunities.

a) *Key interdenominational residential schools* are the College of Christian Theology Bangladesh and the Christian Discipleship Centre. Both also run TEE and short-term programmes which are of great strategic importance.

b) *Denominational Bible schools and seminaries* are also important in Bangladesh, run by AoG, GFA, ABWE, Free Baptist, Anglican, Adventist, Lutheran and Church of Bangladesh.

c) *Indigenous Bible schools* offer training in local community outreach, tailored to the needs of culturally Muslim followers of Jesus.

There are over 20,000 registered NGOs which have multiplied to meet the land’s endless social needs. Indigenous secular NGOs such as the Grameen Bank significantly improved the lives of millions of the poor. The Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee (BRAC) is the world’s largest NGO (2009), a status accompanied by both large-scale success in development work and growing criticism as a “second government” with too little accountability.

Christian NGOs have administered aid since independence and, during the nation’s frequent natural calamities, have demonstrated generosity and impartiality. HEED Bangladesh (Health,

Education & Economic Development), WVI, World Concern and others seek to uphold Christian values and prepare the way for local church and mission involvement. Tearfund workers and helps in funding projects and in research.

Bengali people are by far the largest unreached people in the world, numbering around 240 million globally. The majority live in Bangladesh and India, but large communities live in Britain, the USA and elsewhere. It was to the Bengali that William Carey went as a missionary.

Although they revere Carey's memory, the great breakthrough has still not come after 200 years. There are signs of the trickle becoming a flood, however. Pray specifically for:

a) Muslims, who number over 140 million in Bangladesh alone. The Bengali are claimed as Islam's greatest missionary success. But the majority follow "folk" Islam – a blend of Sufi influenced

Islam, indigenous culture and Hinduism. Pray for:

i Openness to the gospel – the vast majority have never heard the true gospel.

ii More workers – given their population, the numbers committed to reaching them are pitifully few (perhaps only four Protestant missionaries for every one million Bengalis).

Pray for a surge in Kingdom workers committed to the evangelization of Bengalis.

iii Those who have responded – many have remained in their cultural/religious context while committing their lives to Jesus. Pray for the nurturing of these followers; pray for leaders who model biblical values and lifestyles, for God-honouring worship patterns and for cultural relevance without compromise of biblical faith. They often face social and family pressure to renounce Christ and opposition from some Islamic leaders. Pray that new believers may experience dependence on God in poverty, firmness under persecution, evangelistic vision and unity with other established Christian communities from differing cultural backgrounds.

b) Hindus, who feel increasingly vulnerable as a religious minority – there have been many incidents of violence and persecution against them. Pray for this hardship to spark openness to Jesus. Some followers of Jesus remain within the Hindu context and do not link with "foreign" Christian bodies. There are 228 Hindu people groups and/or castes, of which 204 are classified as least-reached/unreached. Only among 14 groups has there been any significant response. The upper castes have remained resistant to the gospel.

The tribal peoples' very existence is threatened as the Bengali population explosion pushes further into traditional tribal lands. Several peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts suffer from this slow squeeze; their lands and even their culture are under threat as Islamization accompanies Bengalization. Pray for a just settlement – the granting of limited autonomy to the region has not improved the situation much. Pray also for Christian agencies seeking to bring tribal peoples to Christ (Global Interaction, **ABWE**, **BMS**, **GFA**, **IMB**, Presbyterians and Lutherans). Some groups are almost entirely unreached while others have large Christian populations.

Other unreached groups:

a) Bihari Muslims (Urdu-speaking) are unwanted by Pakistan and stigmatized as traitors in Bangladesh for their role in the 1971 war. Most still live in dozens of former refugee camps

Pray for reconciliation with the Bengali people. Pray for a development plan for them, for Christian workers and for openness to the gospel.

b) Rohingya Muslims. As many as 250,000 of them have fled persecution from the Buddhist Myanmar government. Huddled into refugee camps, facing starvation and often subject to forced repatriation or maltreatment, they have never been evangelized. Pray for those seeking openings to reach them.

Mission agencies have played a valuable role with their social uplift programmes, hence their emphasis on institutions and aid. Pray for the following:

a) Evangelism and church planting. This core aspect is still not occurring on a level that will see the entire nation reached. Blatant proselytism is not tolerated, but relational evangelism is effective. Increasingly strict limitations have been placed on missionaries; some believe expatriate mission work may eventually be squeezed out altogether, especially if Islamists have their way.

b) Development/aid, another area of rightful focus and one which bears good fruit. **ABWE, AoG, ELCA, Mennonite Central Committee, The Leprosy Mission, Interserve, SIM, OM** and **YWAM** are just a few of the many ministries providing much needed assistance for the millions who suffer whilst building good relationships with local governments.

c) At risk people. Child labourers and sex workers are forced into involuntary servitude in tragically high numbers (hundreds of thousands and millions, respectively). Gripping poverty and rampant corruption contribute to these structures of sin and create a living hell with no easy way out. Agencies such as **CMS, Salvation Army, Habitat for Humanity, Compassion,** and **Tearfund** minister into these situations.

d) Business ventures started and run by Christians provide another avenue for serving those in need. Entrepreneurs and investors are currently welcomed by this country.

Scripture is in great demand despite legal complications involving the use of Koranic language in the Bible and attempts to “protect” Muslims from Christian Scriptures. Pray for:

a) Literature distribution. The Bible Society and its extensive ministry of Scripture production distributes around one million Bibles, NTs and Scripture portions each year. **EHC** has distributed over nine million tracts door-to-door and provided over 200,000 BCC courses to seekers.

b) Literacy issues. The availability of the Bible in the Muslim Bengali dialect avails little when over 50% of the population suffers from literacy problems. Pray for effective programmes that will combine literacy training with Scripture. Pray for initiatives in sharing the Bible orally, through story telling and other means.

c) The translation of the Bible into tribal languages. At least five and possibly more translations are needed; work is in progress in some of these.

Other Christian media are important when so much of the population is illiterate. Pray for effective outreach through:

a) Radio. Christian broadcasters (mostly **TWR, GFA, FEBA, Adventists**) transmit over 500 hours per week over shortwave in Bengali, Burmese, English, Hindi and a host of other tribal languages. Pray especially for the production of suitable and sufficient programmes for the non-Christian majority.

b) *The JESUS film*, used among Hindus and Muslims with good response. It is completed in Bangla, Sylheti, Assamese and 15 other languages. Pray for the spiritual growth of new believers coming to Christ through the JESUS film.

c) *Audio ministry*. GRN has a staggering 91 languages and dialects with audio resources. The HELP (Health, Education and Leadership Program audio series prepares young people to serve God and their country.