

# Without Words, Members Reach Out

**Dozens travel long distance to minister to tsunami victims in their homeland**

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There are things, Elder David Walch has recently learned, that words cannot describe and images cannot capture:



On the one-month anniversary of the tsunami, a fisherman fishes near a ruined bridge on Koh Lanta Island, southern Thailand on Jan. 26.  
AP photo/Teh Eng



Children at camp in Sulerikad, India, hold new school kits distributed by Church members.  
Photo by Elder Dan Caldwell



Elder Dan Caldwell, Welfare Services country director in India, discusses local assistance needs with Swami Chidanand Saraswati, who operates India Heritage.  
Photo courtesy Elder Dan Caldwell

The smell of death. The sound of sorrow. The site of nothing where a village once stood. The story of a mother, whose life was so devastated by a tsunami that she cannot find the strength to look at the ocean.

And then, said Elder Walch — country director for Welfare Services in Thailand — there are other things: The smell of rice. The sound of a child's laughter. The site of adults so hungry for laughter that they flock to it. Church members listening to the story of a mother, weeks after a tsunami changed everything.

During a telephone interview from Thailand Jan. 24, Elder Walch spoke of the devastating tsunami that struck southern Asia Dec. 26, of the lives destroyed by the disaster and of the Church's massive relief effort — fueled by donations from across the globe and the service of local members.

The tsunami, triggered by a 9.0 magnitude earthquake, killed more than 200,000 people in a dozen nations, including Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and India. The disaster also set into motion what the United Nations has called the "world's biggest-ever relief operation."

Like the many nations and organizations providing relief, the Church responded immediately, sending water, food, medical supplies, clothing, tents and body bags. Local members in each of the countries — and in Hong Kong — assembled hygiene and personal kits for the victims. They purchased kitchen supplies, tarps and clothing.

Yet, as Elder Walch and his wife, Phyllis, visited the relief camps in Thailand, they discovered that the victims were in need of something else. "It was clear to us that what these people needed was to have their spirits lifted," said Elder Walch.

So more than 40 members of the Thailand Bangkok Stake and missionaries serving in Bangkok got on a bus, traveled 10 hours to Phuket, and spent an entire day visiting with and listening to tsunami survivors.

A week later, 40 more Church members made a second trip, with another 40 arriving Jan. 28. The members and missionaries did no proselytizing.

In the camp, members went from tent to tent, giving as many people as possible the chance to tell their story: A mother mourned her two adult daughters; a couple shared their guilt after leaving others behind as they ran to save themselves; a fisherman began to calculate his losses — his village, his home, his loved ones, his tools, his boat.

"They were so appreciative for the opportunity to talk," said Elder Walch.

During their first visit, members distributed 750 ice cream bars; the next week, they took rice cookers. But the most important thing they gave, said Elder Walch, was laughter.

During one visit, a few missionaries and members found a tent filled with pre-school children and asked if they could stay. The elders organized a game of musical chairs and a circle tag game. Others taught the children the "The Hokey Pokey."

"For the first time since the tsunami occurred there was laughter. You could hear it," said Elder Walch. "The surprising thing was that the adults in the area started gathering around to see what was going on that has caused these little children to laugh."

Elder Walch said the Latter-day Saints who traveled 20 hours on the bus to minister to the people, without exception, wanted to return. The buses for future trips, however, were already full.

"I thought I knew a little bit about welfare," said Elder Walch, a former bishop and stake president. "But to see how the Church and the members of the Church have been so generous in their assistance and help is a wonderful confirmation that the gospel is really, really true."

Garry Flake, director of Church Emergency Response, said members are giving of their time in other affected countries as well. In Sri Lanka, members distributed 1,000 hygiene kits in refugee camps. In Indonesia, members distributed kitchen and personal kits.

"It continues to be a reaching out of resources and other important things the Church has to offer," he said. "At the same time it is local members and their reaching out and their involvement that has become so critical and so recognized."