

Bangladesh



The People's Republic of Bangladesh is located on the south coast of Asia. Its name literally means *Bengal Country* in the Bengali language. It covers an area that is almost exactly the same as the state of Montana. Its population is 150 times as large, making Bangladesh one of the most densely populated countries in the world. The capital city is Dhaka.



Fr. Andrew Small, OMI and friend in Sylhet, Bangladesh

Most people who live in Bangladesh are Muslim (about 89%); about 8% are Hindu. The 0.5% who are Christian are mostly of Roman Catholic and some

Protestant denominations. The first Catholic church was built in Bangladesh in 1600 at the invitation of the reigning king. At present, Catholics total about 221,000 people and are spread across 6 dioceses in the country. There are 70 parishes total in those dioceses.

Although education is free and the government even gives grants to some private schools, only about 61% of Bangladesh's citizens can read and write. There is a very high drop out rate, especially for girls. This has led the government to pay families stipends for sending their girls to schools at least through the 10th grade.

The Catholic Church, though small in numbers, is looked to as a leader in many social services areas, none more so than the field of education. The National Director of the Pontifical Mission Societies—parent organization of the Missionary Childhood Association—saw this first hand during his visit to the newest diocese in Bangladesh, Sylhet. Fr. Andrew Small, OMI visited a mission school at the Kalagool Tea Estate. Run by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

Making a difference in Bangladesh



Bishop Bejoy D’Cruz, OMI is the Bishop of the Diocese of Sylhet, Bangladesh. He oversees not only the school at the tea estate, but also the seven parishes in his rural, tribal diocese. Six of these parishes are staffed by his missionary order. Of the 20 priests

working in the diocese, only 2 are diocesan priests.

The people they serve work on the tea estates for which Sylhet is known. There are 132 tea estates in the hilly, forested area. Most of the Catholics do not live near their parish—they are spread out into tiny villages of sometimes as few as 10 families. Priests must travel hours, sometimes by motorcycle, or even by bus to reach them. It is not unusual for them to have Mass in a given village only five times a year. The Catholic Church is known for its services, which are open to all people.

“The Church has a lot to offer the poor and those most in need,” says Bishop Bejoy. Most of the tea workers make only 50 cents a day, which is not enough to provide for the basic necessities of their families—food, clothing and shelter. They cannot afford to send their children to school or to receive health care when they are sick. These two issues are among the bishop’s highest priorities for his people. His first priority is showing those he serves the value of our faith—of having Christ’s saving love as the center of their daily life.

This lesson Bishop Bejoy teaches every day with help from his priests, Religious Sisters and catechists who have been trained with help from the Pontifical Mission Societies. We had the privilege of meeting Bishop Bejoy when he visited the United States. He was particularly grateful to meet our Boston Office staff as we send him Mass stipends to help his priests run their parishes and schools. He taped a message for everyone who helps his people, go to our YouTube channel—<http://bit.ly/1eMZjWI>—and hear Bishop Bejoy offer his thanks as well as describe the work of his priests in his dioceses.

Soon after the message was taped, Bishop Bejoy suffered a heart attack while here in the US. He had surgery, recovered and returned home to a place where the same healthcare



Children at a tea estate celebrate visitors to their school.

would not have been available—even to the bishop of the diocese.

At last report, members of the Missionary Childhood Association sent Bishop Bejoy the \$132,000 they had sacrificed to help the children who live on the tea estates of Sylhet, Bangladesh.

MCA members in Bangladesh sacrificed \$3,863 for their brothers and sisters worldwide.

Missionary Childhood Association

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