

# Stories from Sri Lanka

A study course to explore our companion links

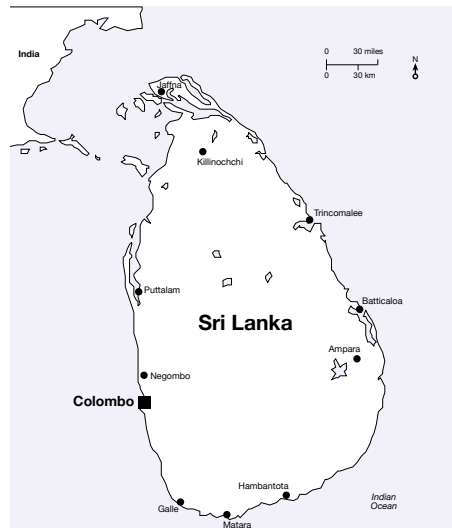
## Introduction

In September 2013, Brad Frey, from Christian Aid's Church relations team, and I visited the Dioceses of Colombo and Kurunegala in Sri Lanka. Like others before us, we aimed to strengthen the companion links between these two dioceses and the historic Diocese of Ripon and Leeds, now part of the Diocese of West Yorkshire and the Dales.

In particular we wished to collect a few stories of the lives of some of the people we met. We are grateful for those conversations and for permission to weave their stories into the narrative of this short study course.

We hope the course will both stimulate your interest in our companion dioceses of Colombo and Kurunegala and also encourage you to reflect upon those issues that affect our own lives here in this part of the world.

Visits between our countries are generously facilitated by the David Young Fund. We hope that churches and individuals might be inspired to contribute to this fund as you discover more about the people and churches with whom we share fellowship in Sri Lanka.



Members of the Sri Lanka task group and our Sri Lanka Link Officers are very happy to come and speak about the link and we would love more people to become involved in the link across the diocese as we learn about our sisters and brothers in Christ across the world. Find contact details on page 3 if you'd like to get involved.

**Adrian Alker,**  
**Director of Mission Resourcing**

## Sri Lanka fact file

Sri Lanka has a rich and complex history dating back over 2,500 years. Now officially the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, it was formerly known as Ceylon and gained independence from British colonialism in 1948. The mixture of races, religions and languages has been a constant challenge to the governance of the island's peoples. It is a densely populated country, home to 21 million people. The largest ethnic group are the Sinhalese people, making up 75% of the population and Sri Lankan Tamils are the second largest group, constituting about 11%. Sinhala and Tamil are the two official languages and English serves as the link language often used for education, scientific and commercial purposes. Churches in Sri Lanka may have services in any of these different languages.

A tropical climate means Sri Lanka has amazing biodiversity. There are 24 wildlife reserves, several bird sanctuaries, more than 100 rivers and of course extensive tea plantations in the central hill areas. Its beaches and natural beauty make tourism an important part of the economy.

But environmental disaster and civil war have marred the country's life over the past 25 years, with the 2004 tsunami taking over 35,000 lives and the civil war resulting in upwards of 100,000 deaths. Churches, often working collaboratively through the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka, have done much to bring support, help and reconciliation to people in communities across the country. Through all of this, the people of Sri Lanka offer visitors the warmest of welcomes and hospitality, and experiences that are quite unforgettable.

## Our link with the Church in Sri Lanka



All of the dioceses of the Church of England have some form of 'companion link' with an Anglican diocese or church in another part of the world. This partnership in world mission is an exciting and fruitful way in which Christians from different cultures and in very different contexts can share their understanding and experience of God's saving love as revealed in Jesus Christ.

The former Diocese of Ripon and Leeds has been linked with the two Sri Lankan dioceses of Colombo and Kurunegala for over 25 years. A former Bishop of Ripon, David Young, served in Sri Lanka with the Church Mission Society. He became interested in Buddhism, becoming director of Buddhist Studies at the Theological College of Lanka, in the city of Kandy. His enthusiasm for interfaith dialogue and understanding led to the establishment of this link in 1977.

Over the decades since, many clergy and lay people have visited Sri Lanka from the parishes of the diocese. Schools links have been made, and prayerful and practical support given at times of national tragedy for Sri Lanka. In turn we have had the pleasure of hosting bishops, clergy, teachers and others from Sri Lanka in the homes and communities of our diocese.

Over the years the link has been overseen by a succession of Companion Link Officers, whose enthusiasm and hard work has ensured the ongoing success of this companionship.



## Want to know more?

### Friends of Sri Lanka

Receive updates and news about Sri Lanka and the link. Get in touch using the contact details below.

### David Young Fund

Grants are available towards travel costs to visit the Church in Sri Lanka in certain circumstances.

Churches and individuals are urged to support the David Young Fund, in order that we can continue to support people coming from and going to Sri Lanka to strengthen our links. Cheques for the Fund should be made payable to 'Leeds DBF' (writing David Young Fund on the back) and sent to the Leeds office. If you wish to make a bank transfer please phone the Leeds diocesan office for details.

### Further details

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**Sri Lanka Link**

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**About this study course**

We hope you will enjoy using this study course, both to deepen awareness and understanding of the lives of Christians in Sri Lanka and to connect their stories to your own. Alongside the Bible reflections are challenges to take action and of course to pray for our sisters and brothers in Sri Lanka.

We have attempted to link the six studies with ‘marks of mission’. Throughout the 1990s the Anglican Consultative Council commended to the world church its ‘Five Marks of Mission’. These are:

- to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom
- to teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- to respond to human need by loving service
- to seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation
- to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

While these studies are related to one of these marks of mission, we also recognise that proclaiming the good news of God’s Kingdom, identified with personal evangelism, is really a summary of what all mission is about. In the stories we collected, the central feature is often of individual Christians and Christian communities striving to bring the Kingdom of God on earth. All mission is done in a particular setting and here the context is the people and land of Sri Lanka.

**Adrian Alker and Brad Frey**

# ‘Make me a channel of your peace’

A mark of mission: to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation

**Since the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, violence and conflict have occurred in every year in some part of our world.**

## Opening reflection

The followers of Jesus Christ are called to be peacemakers. In Matthew 5:9, Jesus says: ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.’

- Share examples of where churches, Christian organisations or individual Christians have been makers of peace. How did they achieve their goal?
- Have you experienced situations of conflict? Share your experiences with the group.

## Jerome’s story

**Jerome Kandeepan is training for the Methodist ministry. At 34 years old, his whole generation has been shaped by Sri Lanka’s civil war.**



In July 2013 the Theological College of Lanka (TCL) celebrated its Golden Jubilee. Over 90% of the active clergy in the Anglican,

Methodist and other Protestant churches in Sri Lanka today have received their theological and pastoral education at the TCL, which not only maintains its ecumenical foundation, but also brings together Sinhalese and Tamil students, women and men in a close fellowship of learning and at leisure.

The principal of the college is quick to point out that the generation of students training for ministry there have grown up only knowing their country torn apart by civil war. We meet one such student, Ramanathapilia Jerome Kandeepan. This is his story.

Jerome is a Tamil originally from Batticaloa on the east coast of Sri Lanka. The Tamil communities in the north and east of the country had long felt the lack of equal rights and opportunities compared to the majority Sinhalese population. The emergence of the Tamil Tigers and the violent conflict that engulfed much of Sri Lanka resulted in a 25-year-long civil war and the death of over 100,000 people. Jerome’s family was displaced three times when he was a boy to avoid aerial bombardment. They were given refuge on one such occasion in an ecumenical monastic centre called Christa Seva Ashram. Here, Christians worshipped in a culturally indigenous way and Jerome’s family converted from Hinduism to Christianity.



Photo: Sri Lanka army media unit/handout

Growing up in a war-torn country brought both scars and a passion to see justice prevail. Jerome's brother was arrested at school, accused by government forces of enlisting with the Tamil Tigers and was held and tortured for three weeks before being released. That Jerome has managed to pull through his difficult past to be undertaking ministry training is testament to his character and determination.

His theology is shaped by his experiences and leads Jerome to raise his voice for the voiceless, regardless of their ethnic background. Knowing what it means to suffer, he looks to Jesus' manifesto in the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4:14-21) to shape his future ministry. Churches tend to focus on spiritual liberation, he says, but Jesus points to the social and human aspects of liberation too.

In 2013, Jerome was elected Student Leader at the college. He draws great strength from the support he gets from the whole student body, regardless of whether they are Tamil, Sinhalese, Methodist, Anglican, Baptist or Presbyterian. 'I don't want to separate Sinhalese and Tamils,' Jerome says. 'We have lived next to each other before. The problem is based in politics and grasping for power'.

In this political landscape, the college is a breath of fresh air. Students and staff together live in community, perhaps a foretaste of what God's kingdom in Sri Lanka might look like when people of all races and cultures can sit at the same table and enjoy their common humanity as sisters and brothers, children of the same heavenly Father.



### Read together: Matthew 5:1-12

Discuss together:

1. Jerome was only eight when his family was given refuge in the monastery. Can the scars that children carry from being raised in war zones ever find healing? How might such healing happen? Think of places today around the world where children live in such situations.
2. In Sri Lanka the civil war was largely between peoples of different faiths and racial backgrounds. Why do we humans find it difficult to coexist with people who are different? How might poverty and inequality be at the root of violence and conflict? What do you find encouraging about Jerome's story?
3. The Beatitudes speak of those who hunger for and are persecuted for righteousness. Is violence sometimes necessary to change a situation? Or should Christians never resort to armed conflict?

#### ► Give

Make a donation to a charity such as Christian Aid who work to help victims of war and tackle the root causes of conflict.

#### ► Act

Find out about Christian peacemaking organisations such as Pax Christi or Christians Against the Arms Trade and consider joining.

#### ► Pray

- for people in Sri Lanka who are still suffering from the trauma and consequences of the civil war and for those in the churches who are bringing the reconciling love of God to their communities
- for justice for those in many countries where there is conflict, war and oppression
- for all children who are growing up in places of violence, for those orphaned and those living as refugees.

#### Closing prayer

Loving God, whose will is for humankind to live in peace and harmony, govern the hearts and minds of those in authority. Bring the nations, divided and torn apart by the ravages of sin, to be subject to your just and gentle rule. Amen.

# ‘The labourers are worthy of their hire’

A mark of mission: to respond to human need through loving service

**‘Come and have a cup of tea’, we say, in good times and bad. It speaks of hospitality, of kindness to strangers, of refreshment for weary travellers. But those tea leaves have travelled far to reach our homes.**

## Opening reflection

In the gospels we read of Jesus meeting all kinds of people in their everyday work – tax collectors, Roman soldiers, fishermen. In sending out his disciples he told them that they were worthy of their wages.

- What kind of work do the people who come to your church do? How does your church try to connect with the world of work? Do you know people who feel undervalued or are stressed because of their work?

## The price of a brew: the story of a Sri Lankan tea picker

We meet a tea picker, let’s call her Rani, working on the high hills of the Glenloch Tea Plantation, in the heart of the tea-producing region of Sri Lanka. Before we think about Rani, let’s consider the remarkable story of Sri Lankan tea production.

In 1824 the British brought a tea plant from China to Sri Lanka, then known as

Ceylon. Just sixty years later, almost all the coffee plantations in the country had been converted to tea and huge swathes of the rainforests had become plantations. Plantation owners made their fortunes through the global tea industry. Despite the British roots of the industry, most Ceylon tea today is exported to Eastern Europe and the Middle East. By 2008, Sri Lanka had overtaken Kenya as the second most important tea-producing nation in the world.



## A life of hard labour

More than 1 million people in Sri Lanka are currently employed in the tea industry. As tea plantations grew, finding an abundant workforce became a problem for planters. Sinhalese people were reluctant to work in the plantations and so Indian Tamils like Rani were brought to Sri Lanka. Rani is from



a long line of women in her family who have lived out their lives on the plantations.

The housing and sanitation conditions of tea-labourers are usually poor, in row upon row of one-room houses. Often rooms for labourers have no windows and little or no ventilation, with entire families sometimes living in one room together.

Wages are particularly low. Rani's wage is 380 rupees (about £1.70) each day but she has to pick 18kg of tea to earn that money! The men who work on the tea plantations cut down trees or operate machinery; they're better paid and finish the day earlier. Rani is better off than many women whose husbands have left them. Although she has a low literacy level, she hopes that her children will be able to find work beyond the poverty-level existence of the plantation.

Some of Rani's neighbours, her fellow tea pickers, suffer a great deal from sexual and physical abuse in communities where alcoholism is endemic. A study conducted in a tea-growing area of Sri Lanka revealed that the serious lack of privacy and violence has led several women to commit suicide, especially newly-married women. According to studies by Christian Aid, female Indian Tamil plantation workers are particularly at risk from discrimination and victimization. Important work on women's rights has begun to make a difference to these plantation workers, with many neighbourhood women's groups being formed across the country, educating them in gender issues, leadership and tackling violence against women.



### The centre of the community

The Christian Church in Sri Lanka has long sought to help and support those living on the plantations. There are Estate Development Community Missions, aiming to support plantation families with child care, education and medical care. Holy Trinity Anglican Church (pictured) is a small, whitewashed church on a wooded hill. Inside there are brass memorials to a number of plantation owners and superintendents. Today the church runs pre-school classes, and offers an important sense of community, learning and hope for the future to many families.

## A fair wage for Rani?

As the economy of Sri Lanka begins to improve following the end of the civil war, one might hope that the lives of people like Rani would improve. Unfortunately the Ceylon tea market relies on sales to the Middle East, so it's now suffering as a result of instability in that region.

However there are pressure groups and human rights organisations that, together with the global Fairtrade movement, aim to improve the lives of tea pickers like Rani.

Only 7% of all tea currently produced is registered as fairtrade. A significantly larger proportion of tea is part of the Ethical Tea Partnership, one example being tea sold by Taylors of Harrogate. Today in the UK, the fairtrade labelled tea is growing in consumer demand with the Co-op and Marks and Spencer supermarkets stocking only fairtrade tea and coffee. Sainsbury's have also switched its own brand tea to fairtrade. The more we buy such fairly-traded tea, the more we help to better the lives of people like Rani.



### Read together: Amos 5:11-17

#### Group discussion

1. In this passage the prophet Amos rails against the unjust oppression of the poor in his day. As you meditate on this passage of Scripture and think about the lives of workers such as Rani, what might Christians do to bring about justice in the workplace? How do we go about 'seeking good'?
2. Do we, in our homes and in our churches, buy fairtrade tea and coffee? If not, why not? What other products do we consume that we could switch to fairtrade?
3. Think of those in our own country who live in relative poverty. What does poverty look like here? How might we help to reduce and eliminate it?

### ► Give

Give a packet of fairly traded tea to a friend and ask them to consider using it regularly.

### ► Act

On your next shopping trip, look for fairtrade options for each of the items you will buy. If they are not available, how might the store management be encouraged to change their practices?

If your parish does not serve fairtrade tea, coffee and sugar, speak to those responsible to make the switch.

### ► Pray

- for all tea pickers in Sri Lanka, especially those who suffer from extreme poverty and abuse and for all who are working to uphold their rights and dignity
- for people in the UK, including children, who live in poverty and for those who work for a more just and equitable society
- for ourselves as we gather around the table to drink tea and enjoy our meals, that we might remember all whose labour has produced 'our daily bread'.

### Closing prayer

**Holy God, whose name is not honoured where the needy are not served, and the powerless are treated with contempt: may we embrace our neighbour with the same tenderness that we ourselves require; so your justice may be fulfilled in love, through Jesus Christ. Amen. (Janet Morley, in 'All Desires Known')**

# ‘For the kingdom of God belongs to such as these’

A mark of mission: to teach, baptise and nurture new believers

**In the western and northern parts of our world today, children enjoy a very different lifestyle and many more opportunities than they did a century ago. In developing countries too, more resources are being spent on children’s education and health. In Sri Lanka, it’s more common for children from Christian homes to be part of their churches than it is for young people in the UK.**

## Opening reflection

In Jesus’ day children were not held in high esteem. They were very much to be ‘seen and not heard’. Nevertheless Jesus seemed to hold a special place for them in his heart and told his listeners that they must ‘receive the kingdom like a little child’.

- Share your thoughts about the differences between growing up as a child 20, 30 or 40 years ago and today. Do young people today have a better life than children in the past?
- Share with others the ministry to children that takes place in your church.



## Nalin’s story

**Teacher and musician Nalin uses his skills to serve his community as part of the Church’s mission to nurture.**

Most of us in the UK are neither desperately poor nor fabulously wealthy. Because of our education and upbringing we may have been fortunate to get a decent job and to bring up our families in reasonable security. But we also know that the gap between the very rich and the very poor seems to be widening.

Sri Lanka is returning to a pathway of modest economic growth. Today about 8% of the population live on less than two dollars a day, but just 4% of people are wealthy enough to be counted part of the ‘global middle class’. For most people, like Nalin, their work enables them to buy life’s essentials but not much more.

Nalin was born in the north of the island, in a village not far from the historic Buddhist city of Anuradhapura. Aged 30, he lives in the family home with his widowed mother,



a former nurse who worked for a while in Germany, and four brothers, two of whom are married.

The family live together in two houses joined together. The land they have covers a four-acre area and was inherited from Nalin's grandparents. Although such land makes the family seem as though they have financial security, this is really an illusion. The piece of land has been in their family for generations and is hugely important to them, but in legal terms, they only own the deed to the very small section on which their house is built. To try to help make the family less financially vulnerable, one of Nalin's brothers has begun to build another house on the land so that other people won't come and build on it. But finding the

funds to develop further is tough for a family of modest means!

The family all support each other and especially their mother. They have all been well educated (97% of children in Sri Lanka attend school) and Nalin trained as a teacher in Kandy, which is three hours away by bus. The government paid for his university education. Two of Nalin's brothers are in good jobs, one as a police officer and one as a tour guide in Colombo, while another brother is at university.

Nalin returned to his village area and teaches at a small local school with 60 pupils aged 5 to 16. The class sizes vary from four to 12 children and although the school has ten computers, there is no drinking water at the school. Indeed there are just

two wells in Nalin's village and most of the water is polluted. When he was applying for teaching jobs, Nalin hoped to teach in a more urban area but he has grown to love working with the children from more impoverished backgrounds in the area where he grew up.

Nalin's father was a Buddhist, like 70% of the people of Sri Lanka. Growing up, Nalin attended both the Buddhist temple and the local church, because of his mother's Christian faith. His father would not allow his sons to convert to Christianity but Nalin was baptized after his father's death. His brothers do not share his faith and at times Nalin find himself being mocked by some of the neighbours for being a Christian. For two years at a time, Nalin's father worked

abroad in Oman, as a heavy vehicle driver. Many parents find work in the Arab states and often leave their children in the care of other family members.

How does Nalin express his Christian faith? We met him playing the piano at the church of the Talawa Mission not far from his village. Founded by a missionary in the 1920s, the 'House of Joy' cares for girls aged from 8 to 16, some of whom live there and are introduced to Christian faith. Nalin enjoys using his teaching and his musical talents to enhance the lives of the vulnerable young girls at Talawa. His love and care for the children shine out. One day he hopes to marry and build his own house on the family land and continue to help at Talawa.





## Read together: Mark 10:13-16

### Group discussion

1. As a teacher and as a helper at the Talawa Mission church and House of Joy, Nalin shows something of the love, joy and compassion of Christ. How significant do you think such examples are in bringing people to be disciples of Christ? Reflect on examples of such care for young people in your community.
2. Nalin's life typifies the way families support each other in Sri Lanka, often sharing home, land and income. What contrasts and similarities can be drawn from our family lives here in the UK? What can we learn from Nalin and his family?
3. Nalin's father had to find work in Oman. The mothers of many of the girls in the House of Joy work in domestic service in Arab countries. Think of the reasons why such patterns of immigration and work occur across the world, not least in Europe. Is this a good or bad thing?
4. What do you think it means to enter the Kingdom of God like a little child?

### ► Give

Consider making a gift to the House of Joy in Kurunegala diocese. Get in touch using the contact details on page 3 to arrange this if you'd like to.

### ► Act

Find out more about the care of vulnerable children in your area and how you might support this work.

### ► Pray

- for those who teach and those who learn in schools across Sri Lanka and our own country
- for children whose parents must find work abroad and leave them for long periods of time
- for those whose commitment to Christ can lead them into mockery or danger.

### Closing prayer

Gracious God, whose Son shared at Nazareth the life of an earthly home, bless our homes and our families, that together we may minister to each other as you have ministered in Christ to us. Amen.

# ‘Anything you did for the least of my brothers and sisters, you did for me’

A mark of mission: to respond to human need through loving service

**In the Gospels we read how Jesus brought a sense of wholeness to people who suffered from physical, mental and spiritual illness and disability. Today, across the world, the lives of people who are sick or disabled are gradually being improved through better healthcare and changes in attitude and awareness.**

## Opening reflection

It is estimated that 20% of the population of the UK are disabled. If the Church reflects the community in which it is set, then disabled people would constitute the same percentage within church communities. What factors might affect whether this is true?

- Does anyone in your group have personal experience of disability, their own or that of friends or family? What are the main challenges faced? How inclusive and welcoming is your church to disabled people? What would improve the welcome?

## Christine’s story

We all know people who have been ‘pillars of the church’, who have served their Christian community over decades. Here is one such person.



Christine was born in 1937 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Her grandparents and parents were Anglican so she attended church schools. She became very proficient in English, the language used in her home growing up. At Southlands Methodist School in Galle, Christine soon knew that her ambition in life was to be a teacher and after attending teacher-training college in Colombo, she taught English in schools until retirement at the age of 55. But Christine was determined to continue some form of loving service and



at the age of 60 a friend offered her a job as an office worker for a non-governmental organisation working for people with illness and disability.

The organisation is called Navajeevana, which means ‘New life’. It was started in 1996 by a group of Christian doctors and other professionals who saw the need for affordable medical services for the poor. They felt that by charging those patients who could afford to pay, they would be able to give their service to the poor at a very cheap rate or for free. They aim to treat everybody the same whatever their ethnic, social, or religious background. Over the last twelve years the clinic has expanded from one doctor working in a small rented room, to a dedicated team of doctors, dentists, nurses, and specialists working in a purpose-built clinic.

Christine told us how Navajeevana provided access to education for deaf and blind individuals. In those early days, recounted Christine, a significant challenge was simply to find people with disabilities. The stigma attached to disability meant that parents

often did not want their children to be seen. Workers from Navajeevana would literally go from door to door in the district asking if anyone with disabilities lived in the home. But attitudes are changing, partly down to the success of the organisation’s work in education.

Healthcare in many countries such as Sri Lanka depends upon a mixture of state and voluntary providers, often with charitable funds coming from the wealthier countries of the world. As in the time of Jesus, it is the poor and the vulnerable and those who are pushed to the margins of society through their particular disability or illness, who suffer most. As disciples of the one who laid hands on the sick and brought the healing touch of God’s compassion and love, we can learn from examples from across the world what love in action truly means.

Having worked for Navajeevana for many years, Christine is planning to finish at the end of the year, when she will be 76. When asked how she has remained so active for so long, she attributes it to WWB – worship, walking and bananas!



**Read together: Luke 7:18-23**

**Group discussion**

1. In the light of the Gospel accounts of the healings accomplished by Jesus and with modern knowledge of disease, what might be distinctive about a Christian approach to health and healing?
2. When Navajeevana started, stigma prevented people with disabilities from accessing medical treatment. How far do you think this stigma exists in the UK? In what other ways does stigma hold people back? How does Jesus respond to stigma?
3. What, in particular, do you find uplifting about Christine’s story? How might we be inspired to change our lives by her example?

**► Give**

Consider making a donation to a medical charity working in Sri Lanka. Our link officers will be able to help you choose one.

**► Act**

With others from your church, plan and carry out a review of how welcoming, accessible and inclusive your church is for disabled people.

**► Pray**

- for all who work in the fields of healthcare in Sri Lanka and the UK
- for Christians in Sri Lanka and in the UK witnessing through their lives to the love and compassion of Christ
- for those in every country who suffer physical and mental injury and trauma through war and conflict.

**Closing prayer**

Loving God, whose Son Jesus Christ healed the sick and restored them to wholeness of life: look with compassion on the anguish of the world and by your healing power make whole both people and nations; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

# ‘The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed... it grows taller than any other plant’

A mark of mission: to sustain the life of the earth

**In our UK supermarket-dominated food economy, it’s easy to forget that many in the world rely on their own land for food. In Sri Lanka, 84% of the population live in rural areas and this is where poverty is most acute. Of this large rural population, 40% are poor farmers.**

## Opening reflection

‘Give us this day our daily bread’ – Jesus taught his followers to pray in a society that knew about poverty and food scarcity.

- Share experiences of ever being hungry and without food. Are there people in your community who rely on food banks? Why do you think this might be?
- Do you know anybody who makes a living from food production from their land? What challenges do they face?

## A story from Hewadiwela village

**From deep within rural Sri Lanka comes a salutary tale of self-help.**

Hewadiwela village is just south of Kurunegala and only 47 miles northwest of the huge city of Colombo but life in this village could hardly be more different. Here is a largely Christian village founded in 1865 by the church in Kandy and currently inhabited by 400 families. Most villagers

live by farming, growing rice in the paddy fields and involvement with coconut and rubber production. But when poverty strikes, where does the money for seeds and fertiliser come from, to sustain living off the land?



In Hewadiwela we discovered a microcredit programme, run in part through the help of the local Anglican church, which helped to get the scheme off the ground. Fifteen directors are drawn from the local community to act as governors of the company. They work with surrounding villages to assess the needs of individuals who apply for funds. A small level of interest – about 3% – is levied on the loan and checks are made on the applicants but the process of gaining a loan is made as simple as possible.



Alongside this, the village has organised a Thrift and Credit Cooperative Society, where resources are pooled and credit given to members. The cooperative has 600 members. Small loans up to about £68 can receive instant approval at an interest rate of just 2%.

Together these initiatives promote self-employment and protect villagers from taking on unmanageable levels of debt at high rates of interest.

In many ways, life in this village is a far cry from 21st century urban living. Wells are used for water, there is no rubbish collection in the village. But the government does supply (albeit erratically) electricity and a basic road system, schools and some buses.

Most families have mobile phones and TVs and city life is never too far away. Many young people, unable to find work in the villages and unwilling to work in the paddy fields, do leave for the city. But in this village and many others, self-help and community finance initiatives are signs of hope for many whose daily lives are subsistence living.





## Read together: Mark 4.30-32

### Group discussion

1. From the story of this village cooperative, think of the parallels with credit unions in the UK. Can our churches be engaged with these as does the village church in Hewadiwela? And how?
2. What are the threats to the land as a source of food production in different countries across the world? What are our responsibilities as good stewards of God's earth?
3. What for you are the main lessons to be learnt from the parable of the mustard seed?

### ► Give

Why not make an investment, if you can afford to, in a local credit union? One of the largest credit unions in the country is in Leeds – go to [leedscitycreditunion.co.uk](http://leedscitycreditunion.co.uk) to find out more.

### ► Act

If your church wants to undertake a particular piece of community work and you are in an urban priority area, you may be eligible for a Mustard Seed grant from the Church Urban Fund. Have you considered this?

If your church has any outside space, use some to grow food or flowers and perhaps share this work with local people.

Take time to look at the diocesan environment strategy online or watch the video 'Our Hope for God's Creation' at [youtube.com/watch?v=ICszjIXb1dQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICszjIXb1dQ)

### ► Pray

- for the rural poor of Sri Lanka and those who depend on a good harvest from their land
- for those who administer credit unions, both in the UK and Sri Lanka
- for ourselves to be good stewards of the earth, to maintain its fertility and treat it with kindness.

### Closing prayer

May the earth sustain your strength.

May Christ sustain your love.

May you sustain one another's joy.

And may you live as a blessing to God, to the earth and to humanity. Amen.

# ‘The Lord has sent me to bring good news to the poor’

A mark of mission: to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom

**The late Bishop of Liverpool, David Sheppard, wrote that the Bible reveals God’s ‘bias to the poor’. In 2014, half of the world’s population – over 3 billion people – lives on less than £2 a day. According to UNICEF, 22,000 children die each day due to poverty. Even in a rich country like the UK, the gap between rich and poor is widening. In Sri Lanka, poverty is a way of life for the majority of people.**

## Opening reflection

Perhaps for some people in our own country, poverty is a relative term, not affording a holiday compared to our neighbours. For others poverty means reliance on a foodbank or pass-me-down clothes.

- How would you define poverty for a family living in the UK?
- What are the main causes of poverty across the world and how we do go about eradicating poverty?

## A grandmother’s story

Everyday life for this 63-year-old mother and grandmother, Amma Kamalawathy, has its joys and challenges, as for us all. Amma lives in a small village called Rajangamay, about 30 miles from the city of Talawa, where she worked as a cook in a children’s home. Now her health is poor and Amma needs



a heart bypass but her doctor won’t allow this because her blood circulation is too weak at present. But Amma needs to work, even at 63, in order to earn some money. When her husband died fifteen years ago, illiteracy prevented her from filling in the necessary forms to continue receiving his pension. Her two daughters and son live in Colombo and she expects her children to care for her in her old age, as is normal in Sri Lankan society.

For Amma and her neighbours, poverty can strike at any time. When a family member falls ill, although healthcare is free, the cost of medicines and the loss of income can be a huge burden. There are problems unheard of in the UK such as wild elephants encroaching on the village, destroying crops

and sometimes homes. Extreme weather events such as the 2004 tsunami can be devastating. The long raging civil war left many women without husbands and sons and the resulting economic slump led to widespread unemployment.

These set-backs all bear down on the poorest people in Sri Lankan society. So often it is the women in the family who have to try to hold everything together, looking after children

and grandchildren, shopping as economically as possible, making clothes and caring for sick family members. Alcohol and drug abuse afflict communities, as they do across the world. Yet despite these difficulties Amma and her neighbours give thanks for their families, for the new 'luxuries' in life such as mobile phones, for better healthcare and improving infrastructure so that the supply of electricity and running water becomes more normal.



**Read together: Mark 4:30-32**

**Group discussion**

1. How do you understand the Kingdom of God being 'good news for the poor'?
2. Does the story of Amma have any resonances, and in which way, to the experiences of families in your neighbourhood?

**► Give**

Consider making a gift to Church Action on Poverty, the Church Urban Fund or Christians Against Poverty.

**► Act**

Become a Local Lobbyist and make contact with your local MP to make sure government policies protect poor communities:

**[christianaid.org.uk/locallobbyist](http://christianaid.org.uk/locallobbyist)**

**► Pray**

- for families like Amma's who struggle daily to hold everything together
- for poor families known to you and for ways to help them at times of extreme difficulty
- for campaigning groups such as Church Action on Poverty and Christian Aid.

**Closing prayer**

**God of the poor, we long to meet you yet always miss you:  
we strive to help you yet only discover our need.**

**Interrupt our comfort with your nakedness, touch our possessiveness with your poverty, and surprise our guilt with the grace of your welcome in Jesus Christ.  
Amen. (Janet Morley, in 'All Desires Known')**



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