

Rochester man tours ravaged Bangladesh

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Imagine standing in a freshly dug grave containing 150 bodies, many of them of children.

John Engels does not have to stretch his imagination to picture such a scene.

Engels, father of two small children, had that experience less than two months ago on a roadside in Bangladesh.

"It was very moving to stand over a grave and pray and to let into my own heart the suffering and the vulnerability that most people on this planet live with day after day," he remarked.

Engels traveled to Bangladesh July 6-17 to survey damage caused by a cyclone that struck the country April 30.

The storm killed an estimated 140,000



John Engels surveys the damage in the coastal village of Anowara, Bangladesh.

people, and left thousands more homeless.

Like so many people who watched the devastation on television in early May, Engels was deeply moved. But he decided that he had to do something in response.

Realizing that the disaster's emergency phase would be over by the time he could get anything organized, Engels decided to seek a long-term solution to the problems caused by such storms in Bangladesh.

Engels consulted with his wife, Alison (Sunny), and his partner, Frank Staropoli, about how their business could address the problem.

The two men operate the Great Lakes Leadership Group, Inc., a consulting and training firm. Although the firm works with local companies schools and hospitals

to help improve interpersonal relations and management styles, it is also concerned with global issues, Engels noted.

"We have a real deep commitment to the poor, to the people who suffer," he said, pointing out that each month he and Staropoli donate 5 percent of the company's gross receipts to charity. They also donate 5 percent of their time to helping charitable organizations, he added.

Staropoli and Engels soon formed the Rochester Bangladesh Relief Project to collect funds to help the people of Bangladesh. Their goal was to raise \$10,000, which they hoped to solicit from individuals and the businesses with which they work.

Engels contacted the Greater Rochester Community of Churches, which agreed to serve as the conduit for donations. In addition, he said, the group — a coalition of local denominations (including the Diocese of Rochester), churches and church-related organizations — would help the relief project establish contacts through out the area.

In addition to raising money, Engels resolved that he would go to Bangladesh to determine how the money was to be used and who would receive it.

Because he could not speak the language, Engels contacted Father Doug Venne, a Maryknoll priest who served in Bangladesh from 1977-89. The priest, currently living in Detroit, readily agreed to accompany him.

Engels and Father Venne flew from Newark, N.J., to London to Bombay, India, and finally to Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. They then traveled to Chittagong, in the heart of the region devastated by the storm.

Engels said he was amazed at how quickly the area had recovered.

"They are unbelievably resilient people," Engels said of the Bengalis. "The highways, the bridges were all rebuilt."

Nevertheless, the human suffering remained, he said.

As Engels and Father Venne drove through the countryside, they saw many mass graves like the one at which Engels stopped and prayed. They also spoke with people who had lost their homes, their crops and their families.

Engels recalled in particular one man who had been holding his two daughters as the storm struck and huge waves swept through the area.

"A wave came ... and he needed to let one of (his daughters) go so he could hold on to a tree," Engels said. "Another wave came and the water came with such force



John Engels
Women share a crowded hospital ward in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Last April, a cyclone killed an estimated 140,000 people in the country.



Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity care for orphans in Dhaka.

that he couldn't hold on (to the tree) with one arm, and he had to let the other child go."

Engels said he saw the man's story as a metaphor for vulnerability not only of the people of Bangladesh, but of all Third World countries. Yet even with such tragedy and such loss, he added, the people show resiliency and a sense of hope.

Nevertheless, Engels added, inhabitants were struggling to survive because they had lost an entire crop and nearly a million cows — their main beasts of burden. In addition, the sea water that washed inland during the storm had contaminated the soil.

Even before the storm, Engels continued, the people of Bangladesh had lived a simple, austere lifestyle.

"It's eye opening to be in the midst of

a lifestyle that is so basic, that has basic survival as its driving force," he noted.

That contact has led Engels to question his own lifestyle and that enjoyed by most people in the United States.

"It caused me to question how my money is spent," Engels said. "I became aware of non-necessary items of pleasure that I purchase."

During the trip, Engels decided that funds from his relief project will go toward building a concrete cyclone shelter that will house the inhabitants of Anowara, a village that was heavily damaged by the cyclone. Ten similar shelters had protected up to 2,000 people each.

"We feel really good about the project because it's a preventative measure," Engels observed. "It's not relief. It's a development project. It will give the people there jobs."

Further, Engels established contact with the Bangladesh office of Caritas, an arm of Catholic Relief Services. Caritas will receive donations from the Rochester relief effort, and will oversee construction of the shelter.

Since returning to Rochester, Engels has already spoken about the effort at some local companies, garnering approximately \$6,000 in contributions. He plans to speak at parishes and to community groups to help raise the additional money needed for the shelter.

Looking back at the trip, Engels said it was "a humbling experience" and caused "a reawakening of my own compassion."

Bangladesh and its people are no longer just pictures on his television, Engels said. "There is no mystery. The mystique is gone. It's a real place. I know it. I felt it. I tasted it."

EDITORS' NOTE: Contributions for the Rochester Bangladesh Relief Project can be sent to the Rochester Community of Churches, 17 South Fitzhugh St., Rochester, N.Y. 14614.

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
Holy Family St. Ambrose St. Boniface St. Rita's St. Stanislaus St. Theodore	1 Holy Apostles	2 Holy Apostles St. Francis Xavier St. Stanislaus	3 Bishop Kearney Guardian Angels Holy Family Home School Assoc. Our Lady of Perpetual Help	4 St. Anne Holy Cross St. James St. Mary Our Mother St. Philip Neri St. Stanislaus	5 Holy Ghost Most Precious Blood St. Cecilia's St. Mark's	6 Good Shepherd St. Ambrose St. Casimir's St. Thomas the Apostle
8 Holy Family St. Ambrose St. Boniface St. Rita's St. Stanislaus St. Theodore	9 Holy Apostles St. Charles Borromeo St. Mary	10 Holy Apostles St. Francis Xavier St. Stanislaus	11 Bishop Kearney Guardian Angels Holy Family Home School Assoc. Our Lady of Perpetual Help	12 St. Anne Holy Cross St. James St. Mary Our Mother St. Philip Neri St. Stanislaus	13 Holy Ghost Most Precious Blood St. Cecilia's St. Mark's	14 Good Shepherd St. Ambrose St. Casimir's St. Thomas the Apostle
15 Holy Family St. Ambrose St. Boniface St. Rita's St. Stanislaus St. Theodore	16 Holy Apostles St. Charles Borromeo St. Mary	17 Holy Apostles St. Francis Xavier St. Stanislaus	18 Bishop Kearney Guardian Angels Holy Family Home School Assoc. Our Lady of Perpetual Help	19 St. Anne Holy Cross St. James St. Mary Our Mother St. Philip Neri St. Stanislaus	20 Holy Ghost Most Precious Blood St. Cecilia's St. Mark's	21 Good Shepherd St. Ambrose St. Casimir's St. Thomas the Apostle
22 Holy Family St. Ambrose St. Boniface St. Rita's St. Stanislaus St. Theodore	23 Holy Apostles St. Charles Borromeo St. Mary	24 Holy Apostles St. Francis Xavier St. Stanislaus	25 Bishop Kearney Guardian Angels Holy Family Home School Assoc. Our Lady of Perpetual Help	26 St. Anne Holy Cross St. James St. Mary Our Mother St. Philip Neri St. Stanislaus	27 Holy Ghost Most Precious Blood St. Cecilia's St. Mark's	28 Good Shepherd St. Ambrose St. Casimir's St. Thomas the Apostle
29 Holy Family St. Ambrose St. Boniface St. Rita's St. Stanislaus St. Theodore	30 Holy Apostles St. Charles Borromeo St. Mary	SEPTEMBER BINGO CALENDAR SPECIAL PAID ADVERTISEMENT				

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2061 E. Henrietta Rd.
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