

News from the Developing Nations

When I left my wonderful job at Edmund Rice Education Australia and began my new adventure with the Province. It is difficult to fit my job title on to a business card; Coordinator of Cross Cultural Engagement and Developing Nations, Oceania Province of the Christian Brothers. Br Frank Hennessy in Timor Leste suggested I “must be a very important person!” I may not be important but I am certainly privileged and honoured. The privilege and honour is to experience and witness the extraordinary things our Province is doing in mission in the Developing Nations.

Kabankalan

In life one has those privileged moments when you just know you are in the presence of the sacred. One such moment came my way in September. I was visiting Brs Rod Elyard, Luke Quinn and John Moodie in Kabankalan in the Philippines. I spent some time with John Moodie getting to know something of his ministry and the beautiful people he works with and for. The room was absolute loving chaos! The whole host of families from a nearby community were in at the Edmund Rice Centre for ear and eye testing. The nursing team from Edmund Rice Ministries were busy testing the eyes and ears of some 50 excited small children when up came Leonardo – a walking smile.

The first thing I noticed was that Leonardo had severely clubbed feet and struggled to walk.



His smile lit up the room. I know no Tagalog nor Ilonggo and I stammer English and Leonardo had very limited English so we communicated through smiles and sign. I have this little custom when engaging with small children where I teach them this ‘handshake’; grab the hand, twist the hand, run the fingers through, knock knuckles and then high 5 – all a bit of fun! Leonardo and

his mates loved it and soon we were high 5ing and having fun. As I did my special handshake I noticed that Leonardo’s three middle fingers were all webbed. The social worker in John’s team told me Leonardo’s name and that he had recently lost his father and was one in a very poor and large family.



As the day went on John’s team was busy teaching the families about what services they could access in the community, how Edmund Rice Ministries could support them, how they could support each other and of course – getting eyes and ears tested and if necessary

identifying those in need of medical follow up. The ministry was real, respectful and so needed.

As one travels around Kabankalan City and district you often hear shouted out “Brother John”. I think many local people think that is OUR name! But it is not surprising as Brother John Moodie and his team each week reach out to over 600 poor children with a lunch time meal. This is supplemented a couple of times year with school resources and in some cases uniforms. I had the privilege of walking around the ‘Slaughter House District’ with John. Built over a canal and much low lying water – this slum is abject poverty – and yet everywhere we walked John was known by name, greeted with smiles and welcomed among the people.

Edmund Rice Ministries in Kabankalan has many faces. While John and Moneth [his right hand helper] work with children in need Br Luke Quinn is part of a great Community Engagement team led by Gigi. This team truly is living the principles put forward in Our Way into the Future as how we should engage with those made poor. CEP; Community Engagement Program gets to know local communities [by door to door visits], invites them into a relationship with Edmund Rice Ministries, breaks open models of community linked to livelihood and the associated skills and then when the community is ready provides seed funding to begin projects that will empower the local community to have more control over their lives. The seed funding is used for whatever the local community wishes that improves the quality of life for the people. It was a privilege to watch the pride on the faces of the local people as they returned the initial seed funding to ERM as now they were truly standing on their own two feet.



I am from Proserpine in North Queensland and from a sugarcane growing family so I felt so at home among the sugar cane farms. But the poverty is extreme and the labourers are totally dependent upon the farm owners. Luke, Gigi and their teams are helping poor communities gain control more control over their lives and with that comes a greater sense of dignity and better quality of life.



I have rarely felt more proud of being a Christian Brother as I travelled with Luke and the team on home visitation into very poor communities. We were welcomed into poor homes where the excited chatter of women filled the air; the local community women were showing the team how the Community Engagement Program was working for them! Journals and ledgers full of figures, bags of rice, cans of cooking oil, dogs, pigs, giggling babies – a cacophony of sound that all said – something great is happening here.

Br Rod Elyard is a wonderful ministry leader. Rod's great gift is the ability to form team and as well as Vocations work, relationship with key Church and NGO Agencies and juggling the books Rod oversees the whole ERM team; the Community Assistance Program, the Nurses, the Informal Education Program with Angie taking the lead and the Community Engagement Program team.



Timor Leste

The dust in the hills of East Timor / Timor Leste could hardly be more different to the sugar cane fields of Kabankalan and yet the spirit is the same. Timor Leste is a much more subsistence economy than the Philippines and Brs Frank Hennessy, Peter Coe and Barry Callan are working to capacity build the local people. In so many ways life in Timor Leste is probably our most difficult ministry in the Developing Nations. There is little English among the people and where the Frank and Peter minister from Monday to Friday here are no shops and extra facilities other than the warmth of welcome of the local people. One of the first things you notice in Timor Leste is the sense of tradition in that Frank and Peter are building on the wonderful legacy left behind by Brs Dan Courtney and Bill Tynan.

I can't stand reality TV so I am convinced that it is as far away from true reality as one could imagine. If you really want to see 'The Block' or 'Apprentice' watch Peter Coe and his team at work as they build classrooms, renovate living spaces, repair vehicles, bring power to where there was darkness and generally work wonders with little. In all our work in the Developing Nations ultimately it will be the quality of the relationship that will be our legacy; the quality of care and concern and the effort to empower people for that time when we are no longer there.



On this last visit to the 'hills' I was in awe of Peter Coe and his team as they built an extension to the Brothers' Community house in a couple of days. I can't hammer a nail in straight and yet Peter and Norberto and their team had posts and walls and roofs appearing from nowhere linked by some English but more the shared language of mates and workers who can build with their hands.

Everywhere one goes up in 'the hills' one can feel the presence and legacy of wonderful



people like Jennifer Earle from Tasmania, Dr Tim Gray from Sydney, Br Vin Haseler or Katrina Carey-Powell from Brisbane. Br Frank Hennessy, the Ministry Leader has a great gift of relationship. Probably the highlight of my recent visit was to observe his work with the TEKAS – the Kindergartens that are dotted all over the hills and valleys where we minister. This grassroots ministry is vital for the future of this fledgling country. Each Thursday Frank and Delfina [the TEKA Coordinator] and others gather the TEKA teachers for formation and the enthusiasm is extraordinary. My feeble

efforts at breaking open something of the Edmund Rice story were as nothing compared to Delfina inservicing the others on the latest in the TEKA curriculum from the Timor Leste Government. The ministry of building up the TEKA community is a real need and great focus for CER. In some cases the TEKA is nothing more than a grass hut with dirt floor while in others there are colourful resources hanging from the roof, jigsaws and toys and literacy and numeracy aides getting frequent use – but in all cases there is energy, passion and a commitment to make a difference.

Br Barry Callan missed his calling; he should have been a politician! When I visited the minor-seminary to observe Barry's ministry of teaching English to the young men thinking of priesthood he introduced me as a man who has given retreats to Bishops and a Cardinal! As I assumed instant rock-star status I was amused and felt the pressure to deliver! The warmth and depth of respect that the seminarians have for Barry is just beautiful to witness. Barry's manner is so engaging and genuine; if the Timorese priests of tomorrow learn only some of the humility of this man the Church in that country will be rich indeed.

Callan Services

On my visit to Goroka I had the privilege of accompanying some of the Callan Services team as they visited families in poor villages whose children with a disability could not access the



services in the town. I felt awkward and stood back from the gather. Here were Mollienah and her Rugby League loving father Topa Tabiye and the extended family all playing on a large mat on the lawn in front of their home. Suddenly Gloria – a little girl with cerebral palsy began to shuffle towards me on the edge of the area. She was determined to reach me – the stranger – and reached out her arms. I reached down and

immediately was wrapped in a huge hug that said, "Welcome goose – what are you doing over at the side!"

The next morning I visited the Edmund Rice Eye Clinic and sat beside an elderly farmer who the previous day had regained his sight after a cataract operation. The man could not stop smiling and kept on shaking my hand [I had nothing to do with it all!]. All in a day's work at the clinic! That afternoon I visited two of the Callan Services SERCs. In one of the hearing impaired classrooms they sang a welcome song to the visitor and then I watched as a teacher's aide – himself a graduate of the Callan Service SERC Goroka – introduced each student to me with their particular sign. To watch young people claim some sort of dignity and power in their lives through education and language was to deeply feel what I suspect Edmund felt as he stood at the gates of Mt Sion.



Br Ambrose Tottenham's work with people with mental illness in this vulnerable community far from big city services was something special. Ambrose with his gentle nature, his deep compassion and ability to be so present to the person is truly 'brother' to people who are so often misunderstood and so often excluded.

My other PNG Callan Services experience on this first getting to know you visit was to watch Br Kevin Ryan at work with many of the key staff of Callan Services as they engaged in Professional Development. I came away so impressed with the professionalism and passion of the leaders in Callan Services but also with Kevin's humble missiology approach. In several conversations with the leaders they expressed to me their appreciation with Kevin's genuine, empowering approach – his deep listening and his ability to engage as equal in mission.

Maasin

As I said at the beginning of these reflections it is a privilege to be invited into the sacred space which is people's day to day lives. During my first visit to Maasin I found myself



perched precariously on the back of a small motor bike tearing through the Leyte Countryside. I have never ridden on a motor bike in my life and he I was entrusting my life into the hands of Titus – one of the Social Workers at Edmund Rice Ministries. We soon arrived at a small outlying village where Titus and the health team were visiting families in their small huts to monitor the health and educational progress of their small children. The deep respect in which the ERM team engaged with the people showed that they needed no introduction to the Edmund Rice charism. The warmth of the welcome and trust of the people showed that the presence of the team was much appreciated.

We as a Province have much to be proud of in Maasin. The wisdom and experience of Br Graeme Leach as he works to build a sustainable, empowering, locally owned and governed ministry is truly a gift. The generosity of the Indian Province in missioning Placid and Theo to us is to be applauded. Everywhere one goes Theo's great contribution to the local ministry is appreciated; his people skills, his outgoing nature and his passion for the people have touched people deeply. Placid is relatively new to the Maasin mission and yet his wisdom in leadership and willingness to just get in and get things done is valued.

On one of the days on this first visit I accompanied Placid and one of the ERM Social Workers to a community of Philippine Indigenous people – the Sea Gypsies living in a shanty slum on the edge of the sea at Barto. We were instantly surrounded by a sea of smiling faces and the respect that the people had for Edmund Rice Ministries was obvious. Again there was a warmth, a trust and a deep sense of reciprocal respectful relationship.



Br Theo Alvarez does great work with the Youth Development Animation team supporting high school communities through faith development and life skills. The ERM teams are constantly going out into the community to build the capacity of the local communities to gain more control over their lives through increased school attendance, health checks, livelihood assistance and especially the support of children with disabilities.

Perspective

One can discuss until the cows come home about Edmund Rice Network – Family – Movement – but there can be no doubt that at the grassroots level in each of the Developing Nations of Timor Leste, PNG and the Philippines hundreds of dedicated people share our vision and passion for mission to those made poor. While in Timor Leste many of those are from our partner organisation in Australia; HELP, Rotary, Rainbow Ladies, TTN and EREA Schools, in PNG and already in the Philippines so many of the local people are valuing being our partners in mission. The Network of Callan Services in PNG is probably an exemplar of partnership in mission. Overall of this is the commitment, vision and generosity of all those associated with Edmund Rice Foundation Australia and especially its Executive Officer Mr Anthony Ryan whose real respectful commitment to those made poor is an example for us all.

I am still very much in the early days of my role as Coordinator of Developing Nations. One of the exciting challenges for 2016 will be to continue to build on the great work being done in the area of governance. We are indebted to Br Jim D'Arcy for his work in this area in Timor Leste while, thanks to Graeme Leach this task is a lot further down the track in the Philippines.

There is much to be done in the area of growing capacity for charism and spirituality linked to mission building on the strong traditions of the past. Already we are looking to grow models of

formation for mission and in 2016 will utilise the expertise of Brs Theo Alvarez, Luke Quinn and Geoff Whitefield.

Edmund Rice people just get in and get it done. One of the special moments for me during my first four months in this role was to be at a large Mass and dinner for Religious in the Philippines for the Year of Consecrated Life. The Bishop of Kabankalan is Bishop Patrick Byzib – a Salesian and when it came to the dinner the Bishop was to be found towards the back of the large hall sitting at table with a small group of 'his Christian Brothers'. Bishop Patrick told me that Edmund Rice would be so proud of our men for who we are for the ordinary people of his Diocese.



When it is all said and done it is the Leonardo's of this world that tugged at Edmund's heart and drew a response that has gifted us with a great legacy for our day. May we never tire from finding our Cosmic Christ present in and appealing to us in all the love urgings of our day!