

DWU and Managing the Air Crash



Being at DWU is a great place to be, but we have certainly had an extraordinary experience of death this year. Our students are at that age where their parents are vulnerable, but there seems to have been more deaths this year than other years. And at the beginning of this semester we had a student killed in a bus accident, and others injured, when they were returning to study after their semester break.

We will remember Thursday 13 October as the news of the air crash became a reality. Many of the students were waiting at the airport for the arrival of their parents for what was to be a joyful event of their being missioned into their careers after four years of study. Over the next day it became difficult to verify how many students had suffered the loss of parents, but eventually it was seven students had lost eleven parents or relatives, and we also lost an ex-student in the crash.

As darkness settled in the hours immediately after the crash there was a little hope because it was rumoured that there were 32 people in board the plane and that there were ten survivors. Because of heavy rain in the area the rivers were up and the rescue crews could not get to the crash area by road. We supported each other and prayed with hope.

By next morning the hope was gone and the news had come through there were only four survivors and three of them were crew members. We went ahead with our Missioning Ceremony because we had over 450 visiting parents in attendance and we thanked God for the blessings of the last four years. But we were also grieving and many students supported those who were waiting at the local hospital for confirmation of the news.

Our DWU counselling staff went into action right from the news of the air crash and did a marvellous job. Under the guidance of our counsellor, Vicki Wilzcek, as

the grieving students returned from the hospital they were gathered together at Vicki's house and a tarpaulin was erected. This became the community focal point for the next four or five days as the students and staff supported one another. It was not a traditional "Haus Krai" but rather a community-gathering place. After a few days Fr Edward Meli, our Chaplain, established a small grotto with candles and photos, and the community gathered there in prayer each evening.

We had the celebration of the Eucharist on four successive days to remember our loved ones. The first day (Friday), although the Missioning Mass, was celebrated by the Apostolic Nuncio and we remembered in a special way the victims. The next day (Saturday) our DWU President celebrated a Mass for the DWU community and this Mass was recorded by TV crews from Australia and went around the world. On the Sunday our normal community Mass again remembered the victims. On the next day our new Prime Minister asked for a special Mass and he and a number of Government officials attended.

At the Sunday Mass I was reflecting that despite the tragedy was enormous, there was God's hand in the tragedy so far as that it happened in a community that cared for each other.

And of some student reactions:

Leah Magus, a graduating student and council representative at DWU said both her room-mate and another friend had lost family in the crash.

'It's unbearable. You do what you can, you try to be there for them and be strong them but it is hard,' she said.

'You can't accept it.'

"My roommate lost both her parents and my best friend lost four members of his family," she said.

DIVINE Word University School Representative Council president, Allan Kwalu, on behalf of the students thanked Prime Minister, Peter O'Neill, for making time to visit the students affected by the tragedy on campus. He said it was history in the making for the PNG to have O'Neill come in person to pay his respects.

“We have had riots and tragedy striking various tertiary institutions including the University of PNG and technology respectively but have had no visit from the prime minister of the day during those times,” he said.

He thanked Civil Aviation Minister, Puri Ruing, PM’s chief of staff Ben Micah and his team, Madang regional MP, Sir Arnold Amet, and provincial heads who attended the memorial service on Monday.

“The open arms of expatriate couple Vicky and Rudy Wilzac for giving their home to hold the haus kraik including the presence of Dr Michael Mel from the University of Goroka since the crash, who attended the thanksgiving day to be with daughter but stayed right throughout the weekend.

Father Jan Czuba, outgoing SRC executives, students and staff and the people of Madang for their support through this difficult time. We are all in grief with what has happened,” Alan Kwalu added.

There are other connections that link the tragedy.

- The father of one of our students chose not to travel and his wife died in the crash. He was one of the survivors of the famous DLS Bomana cadet Caribou crash in the 1970’s
- Another lady who was due to be at DWU for the weekend was the mother of the young female pilot who died in the Kokoda crash two years ago. The pain and the hurt was opened up again

And now for the recovery as we trust in God and move forward.

Despite newspaper reports it will take many weeks before any identification of the victims will be confirmed. Our students continue to grieve through that time and will need close support. They have given DNA samples that have been sent to Australia to assist in identification of relatives. There is a reality that some victims will not be identified and we

prepare our students for that reality. Two students have gone home temporarily but will be back in a couple of weeks as the identification process nears.

Our other students are in the process of travelling home for holidays, so we also need to safeguard against loneliness and trauma when those around them who have been supporting them disappear.

It will be long process.

- Two students lost both parents in the crash.
- A brother and sister lost four members of their family.
- Another student, who lost her mother in the crash, lost her father only two months ago.

We have set up a trust fund to assist our students for the future, to cover school fees for themselves or for younger brothers and sisters. Many of them will now need to take more parental care for other and younger members of their family.



-Br Andrew Simpson
Vice President Student Academic & Administrative Services
Divine Word University

Please keep the DWU community in your prayers at this time