

## Poverty in Paradise - ABM Pilgrimage to Vanuatu

26 June – 4 July, 2009

It was my privilege recently to go on a Pilgrimage to Vanuatu with ABM. This has become a life-changing experience - personally, professionally, and in my understandings of and appreciation of the wider mission of the Church. Central to the purpose of ABM conducting pilgrimages is to deepen understandings of mission and offer first-hand experiences of ABM's role as a missionary agency in helping Australian communities to engage with God's mission globally. The recent pilgrimage to Vanuatu certainly achieved this aim.

A group of eight formed the team; consisting of Brad Chapman (ABM Pilgrimages Program Manager), Bishop Geoff Smith, and five school chaplains/clergy (6 men and 2 women). We embarked together on a spiritual journey of seeking God in the communities we encountered in the various places we visited, and then reflecting together each day on the implications these encounters have for our own faith journeys, for our leadership within our places of ministry and for ongoing relationships between the church in Australia and Vanuatu. We used the Daily Offices of the Church of Melanesia as a way of entering more fully into their context, and, together with reading the CDA reflection for the day, we spent time talking and praying about and for those communities and individuals we were encountering.

Throughout the trip, we spent time discussing the specific objectives of this ABM pilgrimage and reflecting on the implications

these have for our ongoing support of missionary work in a global context. The concept of development is crucial. How can we help communities in developing countries to move forward? What does "mission" really mean at a grass roots level? Is giving money to specific projects the best solution? Is working with communities one by one a good use of resources? How can we best use our resources, and those of our faith communities at home to support others?

One of the greatest gifts such a pilgrimage offers is the opportunity to be faced with the realities of poverty and hardship and to truly reflect on how best to offer support. ABM always seeks to operate within a local context and to empower people to seek to meet their own needs, rather than to rely on outside support to prop up unjust and oppressive structures, or to encourage a 'victim' mentality. This was possibly the most difficult part of the journey for me. When poverty suddenly has real names and faces, each with a story to share, a desire rises up within to do something now to fix it. The temptation is to form a relationship that can support and make a difference to this person and to this community. We've all heard the story of the person walking along the beach picking up starfish and throwing them back into the sea. "It makes a difference for this one". Perhaps far more powerful is the story of the man at



the side of the river who kept swimming out into the river and pulling drowning people out, one by one, dragging them to the shore and saving their lives. Suddenly, he stopped, and walked off. “What are you doing?” asked a bystander. “Don’t stop. They’ll drown”. The man looked back but kept walking. “I’m going upstream to find out who is throwing them all in and to stop them”, he said. A truly respectful, transforming sense of mission, whilst keeping a balance between these two approaches, is one that seeks to empower communities to articulate their own needs and to seek ways that they, with our assistance, can bring the necessary change and support about. This is not an easy lesson to learn.

We were fortunate enough to be able to visit and stay in communities on the islands of Santo and Ambae. One of the highlights was living for two days in a remote village in the Big Bay area of Santo called Nuwalela. To access this village took a three and a half hour four-wheel drive trip from Luganville (getting bogged twice), driving through a river and climbing a rather steep and very muddy mountain path. Our group were the first white group ever to stay there. This time offered a chance to enter into the daily life of the community, to listen to stories of life and faith, to experience amazing hospitality and to share experiences of the activity of God. We prayed together, shared Eucharist together, ate, sang and danced together; we played with the children (their first experience of bubbles or the Wiggles) and shared songs. We fell over in the mud of their field, washed in their creek, spent time with the Melanesian Brothers at the top of their hill, and visited their school. As a group, we who have so much by worldly standards had never experienced hospitality like it. I am still moved to tears when I recall that they literally killed the fatted calf to prepare a celebratory feast for us.



As well as experiencing the life of the ‘real’ Vanuatu, rarely seen by tourists, part of our purpose was to connect with individuals from the Church of Melanesia, to visit several communities and their schools and to feed back our thoughts and suggestions. What a joy it is to see a real life example of where an ABM program is helping to transform a community. This was the case in a village we visited called Lorevilko. A young woman has been employed by the Mothers Union as the Adult Literacy Teacher. At present, classes are held in the

hallway of the Parish Priest’s house, but we were very proudly shown the beginnings of the framework of the new building, designed to accommodate many more students than is currently possible. The difference that adult literacy is making to this community is astounding. Not only are issues like hygiene and health care much more widely understood, but the level of confidence to contribute one’s personal gifts to the wider community is greatly enhanced. Issues of justice and equality are also taken much more seriously.

Before leaving Australia, we had been asked to act as consultants and to run a one day workshop in Luganville for chaplains and other clergy. Although we felt honoured, when the time came, after experiencing a week in Vanuatu, we felt quite humbled that we should even dare to appear as experts. Hopefully we managed to give them some encouragement and confidence that what they are already doing, amidst such difficulties, is quite amazing. If we were able to give them a fraction of what they had given us in the way of food for reflection, prayer and thought, then we were satisfied.

A year ago, I had never even heard of an ABM Pilgrimage. I wholeheartedly encourage parishes, schools and agencies to support this creative and powerful ministry. I believe the wealth of experience that each member of our team has brought back with us to share with our communities and beyond is one of the most powerful ways of transforming and invigorating our approach to global mission here in the Australian church. If you'd like to hear more about this particular pilgrimage, any of the other members of the team or I would love to share our stories, our photos and our reflections. If you'd like to explore the possibility of going on an ABM Pilgrimage yourself, or sponsoring someone from your community, please contact Brad at ABM.

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