

Fisherman's Island. Saturday August 29th.

I wondered why we were warned to take spare clothes with us to see the community on Fisherman's Island. A few minutes into the journey in the open dinghy the question was answered. As the spray broke over the bows the taste of salt water was soon on my lips and my eyes stinging behind the sun glasses. The discomfort of being lifted from the planks of wood that served as a seat and crashed down onto them again was a small price to be paid for the opportunity to meet with the members of the United Church of Papua New Guinea. The journey from Port Moresby to the island settled by itinerant fishermen in the 1950's was exhilarating and the welcome generous.

Protected by a coral reef from the worst effects of the occasional storm the island is under threat from the effects of climate change. The island has no natural resources other than the fishing grounds, water has to be transported from the mainland and there are no hills. An elder of the church cheerily said that when the threat of a tsunami approached, as they had nowhere to run to, they went fishing. The fishing grounds are producing fewer fish which necessitates hazardous journeys to more distant places. If global warming makes life uncomfortable for people in the west it threatens the very existence of the community on Fisherman's Island.

The welcome and the sharing was symbolised by the meal that was provided and enjoyed. A cricket match with a team from the mainland had been cancelled because of the wind that was whipping up the waves even in the protected waters of the bay. The journey back, dictated by the tide, was far more heart stopping than any theme park log flume. Alternatively soaked by the spray and dried by the sun all the while clinging to the sides we made it back with thoughts and stories cascading within us.

The contrast between Fisherman's Island and the mainland is pronounced. PNG suffers from corruption at many levels, gender inequality is pronounced with domestic violence often unreported. While crime may be largely restricted to urban areas tribal violence can be brutal. The exploitation of Liquid Natural Gas brings wealth to some but as yet there is little evidence to see how that will be shared to the benefit of all. Fisherman's Island has little other than natural beauty, a peaceful and supportive community and the desire to remain so. The challenge will be whether western greed for carbon fuel will dictate that violence and corruption continues while the peaceful island sinks beneath the threat of rising sea levels.

The Australian Government has funded the building of classrooms on the island but increasingly children are passing up the opportunity that education might bring. It may be that the church needs to work harder in PNG and the UK to express the kind of world that God might create with human co-operation. A world worth the investment of time and resources even at the expense of simpler lifestyles that do not exhaust natural resources at an unsustainable level.

So much for day one, tomorrow it is worship with the congregation at Lea Lea.

Sunday August 30th.

Bruised buttocks were not the best preparation for the ride to Lea Lea an hours ride west from Port Moresby. The road wound its way past the fish market and along the coast. A combination of road works, necessitated by the moving of the harbour, and pot holes contributed to the bone shaking experience. The road despite its problems is one of the better maintained as it leads to the Exxon Mobil controlled terminal for the export of gas. Drilled in the highlands the gas is pumped to the refinery for processing before export to China and Asian markets. The conviction is regularly expressed that the PNG Government does not have the necessary experience or skill to manage what should lead to a dramatic improvement in GDP.

At the end of the road across a wooden foot bridge lies the village with the United Church of Bethel dominating the village square. After the formal welcome by the local minister and deacons we are led to the church at which point Carla is told that she is leading the service while I preach. The sermon feels too suited to an English audience to touch the hearts of the congregation of 500 but

they are polite and their delight at our visit genuine. The highlight of the service for us is the unaccompanied singing. In traditional style the women and men sing responsively from opposite sides of the church.

At the close of the service the whole congregation queue up to shake hands before the children of the Sunday School entertain us with traditional music and dance. Then it is back to the pastor's house for lunch. Carla is an honoured guest so eats with the men while the women, who have prepared the meal, sing as they wait for the men to finish their meal before they can eat. There is an infectious joy to the singing and the dancing in which Carla is enticed to join. Gifts are exchanged and as the local language contains no word for 'thank you' we pledge to remember each other in prayer and promise that hospitality will be the mark of our belonging to the church wherever we are. This is truly a global family into which God has called us.

Monday August 31st.

A day of missed opportunity! The morning was spent at the Assembly Office meeting with the Assembly Moderator and General Secretary. We exchanged news of our churches but quickly got to issues of concern for the United Church in PNG. We were told of a group known as the 'United Reformed Church' that has broken away because of alleged corruption in the election of the regional bishop. It was alleged that much wider corruption was common place among politicians, many of whom have businesses in other countries. We were asked directly about our personal attitudes towards same sex marriage. A bill had been introduced to parliament by an MP married to an Australian which had been defeated but the United Church was organising opposition against any attempt to re-introduce the issue. This led on to a conversation about aid from Australia being linked to Australian priorities such as the challenge to traditional PNG gender issues. Evangelism is a priority as the United Church is concerned that it has slipped to being the fourth largest denomination behind the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Seventh Day Adventist.

The afternoon was intended to centre around a meeting with officials of the Government Climate Change and Development Office. In the end the meeting did not take place. We later discovered that the meeting has been scheduled for the morning but no one told us!

We spent the afternoon talking with a retired teacher of mission who had a long experience of PNG. An anthropologist by training he talked of the PNG view of time where you look to the past as the point of reference.

Tuesday September 1st.

It had been suggested that we check into the airport for our flight to Rabaul and then return for a re-arranged visit to the office of climate change. Inevitably this plan was abandoned and we sat for three hours in the airport. East New Britain, where we are headed, is suffering a severe drought because of the El Nino in the Pacific. The temperature and humidity both high. It was good to be welcomed to the home of Bernie and Gwen Collins after a journey from the airport over pot holed mountain roads. Their home is basic, no air conditioning or hot water and frequent power outages but we are grateful for the mosquito nets and the warm welcome. Gwen and Bernie are here as volunteers to help with the MA programme but they return to the UK in Dec 16.

Wednesday September 2nd

We are welcomed at the College Chapel service and then a meeting with the Principal. Although Rarongo is a college of the United Church funding is precarious with support grants paid late or not at all. Students pay their own fees supported by local churches or circuits. We spoke of how the URC might support the work of the College and suggested a possible contact with Westminster. The library is mainly stocked with outdated books but caution is needed when suggesting sending books from the UK as in addition to the shipping costs there is import duty to be paid. The Methodist Church in the UK has agreed to fund the provision of Internet for the library and this would allow the vetting of books before dispatch from overseas. A contact with the library at Westminster might be helpful. When the Collins leave there will be no one on staff able to examine and teach the masters programme. Gwen has made contact with the Uniting Church in Australia

and a potential volunteer identified. I have suggested an approach through CWM for a grant to fund a staff post.

We then attended a class on church and culture and I found myself teaching it. Common areas of concern are around children choosing not to attend church. Discussion followed on the church's approach to funerals and weddings for those not church members. A strange question was around the issue of women wearing trousers, apparently this is an incitement to rape in the mind of at least one student. It is clear that the issue of gender roles and relationships is of pressing concern.

After lunch we attended the faculty meeting where again we were accorded the honour of leading the session. The topic of how the URC might support the college was again raised and we discussed the possibilities of exchanges and contact with Westminster. The concern was raised about staff development. Is it possible for members of staff to find funds for sabbatical study in the UK is the Mona Powell Fellowship an option? Could staff be invited to Westminster for a term funded by CWM? Are there congregations in the URC who would be willing to raise money to support such an exchange programme? Staff need a broader experience to adequately teach such issues as globalisation.

The afternoon included a visit to the local bishop that touched on such topics as the appeal of the cult to young people, the gap between worship expectations of young and old, the effects of drought with people dying of starvation. The bishop had oversight of 600+ congregations in 34 circuits.

The evening was spent in animated conversation around how the URC could best support Rarongo. There is clear concern about the efficiency of the Assembly Office and their failure to engage us with issues of substance in respect of the college and the role of Bernie and Gwen.

Thursday September 3rd.

The day began with a class on Christian Ethics which Carla led and introduced the topic of gender equality. The lesson was well received and hopefully brought a wider perspective to what must be an ongoing conversation.

We then set off down the deeply rutted road past the golf course to Malmaluan School of Skills and Leadership (SSL). This is another institute of the United Church but one designed to equip young people for leadership in the church. The only course that appeared to be running was for school chaplaincy. There was good discussion around the challenges facing young people in both the UK and PNG. We were then given an insight into the practical problems. Some buildings have been declared unsafe, others are badly in need of repair, the library only has books that are out of date and the water supply is critical. Such a situation would result in the immediate closure of an institution in the UK but in PNG staff accept that they might not get paid, students undertake menial tasks and they stagger on. After a generous lunch we proceeded to Gaulim Teacher Training College. 800 students gathered in the chapel to hear an impromptu address from the Moderator! This institution stands in marked contrast to both Rarongo and Malmaluan. There are extensive building renovations and new buildings funded by the EU. Broadband and an IT suite has been provided by AusAid. The Principal is ambitious and a risk taker willing and able to chase external funding.

Friday 4th 2015

7.30 a.m. Class on the theology of the environment and the impact of globalisation taken by Carla. Good discussion around the challenge of extracting and selling fossil fuels, the need to ensure that local people benefit. Comment by a student that Melanesian spirituality is more respectful of the creation.

8.30 class on the history of the LMS which was instructive for us. Good conversation on the + and - of the missionaries which led to the need to listen and understand, how fear can produce violence and how the misuse of authority can be a barrier to evangelism.

9.30 Chapel service followed at 10.30 by Principals Hour which lasted for 90 minutes. I talked about the history and structure of the URC and then took questions on why other churches had not joined the URC, why we no longer had deacons, how the work of the Assembly is funded, how we saw the creation, the breakaway group in Port Moresby called the URC, the conversion of Muslims.

In the afternoon we walked around the campus and then we prepared for the celebration of culture which will involve food and entertainment and will be an early farewell feast. The longer we are here the more we understand and the more we feel accepted and welcome. We have not yet cracked the use of humour.

Saturday 5th August

Day spent at Beach Hideaway relaxing. Carla swam around the coral reef. Good conversation, walked back to Rarongo and met with the Master Class to hear of their research. An impressive group that need to be encouraged.

Sunday 6th August

Father's Day service with many taking part. We met in pastoral groups with another feast prepared by the mothers. Carla continues to make an impact, particularly among the women. One woman confides that life is hard for the families of those in training. The students must pay their own fees with the help of their home congregation, circuit and synod. They are required to grow their own food and rely on food sent by families. Because of the drought there are times when there is not enough food and everyone goes hungry. It makes the abundant feast even more generous. The mothers make sure that nothing is wasted and what is left over is fairly shared.

Monday 7th August,

The alarm goes off at 02.15 a.m. And we leave Rarongo for the pot hole strewn road back to the airport near to Kocopo. We are there for a 5.00 a.m. Check in and we are into Port Moresby on time with a five hour wait for me and a nine hour wait for Carla. I am not at all surprised that there is no one from the Assembly Office to whom I can direct questions about why Rarongo is so poorly resourced and why they failed to inform us of the meeting arranged with the Government Department of Climate Change.

I got to the hotel in Brisbane at 5.30 p.m. and enjoyed the luxury of a hot shower and a meal in the restaurant.