The Journey ..........

Service learning, who are we serving? An adventure and reward.

As an emerging school with much to develop the time had come for us to work on a Service Learning concept for our Senior School students. As we had reached Year 11 this year we felt that we needed to give our students an experience beyond South Australia, in fact possibly beyond Australia. Our dilemma was exactly how we were to go about this.

We are firm believers that all excursions need to be informed by the curriculum and must serve a purpose. The limited capacity of the Eyre Peninsular to deliver activities year after year forced us to look further afield so that our students could experience something different, not more of the same. The first time this happened was our Year Nine, City Week experience. What we found with this camp was a growth in our students, a maturity on their return that was something special. Something happens on this camp that just instills a sense of community, Navigator Community, that is in constant divergence between school and student before the students go. This happened with our first cohort of Year Nine students and became a fixed agenda for the next three years. Now this first cohort of students are in Year Eleven. What can we do with these students now? What experience could we possibly establish to be more rewarding than all the others? We could have established a camp in the snow but for what purpose? We have a Bush Walking Camp for the Physical Education and Hospitality curriculum. However, we needed something more cost effective and experiential. Something that would differentiate us from our direct competition here in Port Lincoln. Something that no other school does on the Eyre Peninsula, hence an overseas trip.

To some of you this may seem a little ‘so so’ because it is nothing new. To others you may think we are crazy (some truth here). But it's not about us, its about the students and little did we know how this would snowball into action, an action of Service Learning that would not only impact our students but others in another country, Indonesia.

Having known Glenice Hartwich from LEA Board for Mission through a previous Church affiliation we decided to speak with her to consider our options. We had asked Principals who each had their way of establishing ‘Partnership Schools’ but were unsure how we needed to go about developing a sister school relationship that worked with the LEA. As Glenice’s work was affiliated with service groups and church groups in liaison with LEA we ‘picked her brain’ and considered the options of safety for our students, different cultures, and costs. The late Adrienne Jericho had been keen for schools in Australia to set up Partnership School relationships as is our current Director, Steve Rudolph but it had to be the right one for us as we, as a school ourselves were still in infancy.
After emails, meetings and many prayers we narrowed down to two options, which I then took to School staff, Leadership and College Council, sighting one of preference. We decided on Gereja Kritsen Protestan Simalungan (GKPS) School in Pematang Raya. It was a Secondary school with a primary school nearby. In addition, we added the Margareth Orphanage in Pematang Siantar as somewhere we could also possibly provide help, and in doing so learn much about the culture and life of the area. Discussions with the Director of LEA and the Deputy Director meant that we were all in agreement.

This Service Learning idea presented exceptionally well with the way in which we integrate our curriculum and excursion/camps. Not only did this fit well with a whole school focus for Christian studies, allowing students across the school to assist with raising much needed funds for GKPS and the making of gifts to be presented to our newly established friends, but the integration of SOSE, English and Languages in the future, are all possibilities. Before we embarked on this experiential adventure we needed to conduct a reconnaissance visit to establish the initial contacts and ensure a number of outcomes were met before we took the students. In our initial visit our objectives included:

- To initiate face to face contact with perspective partners, introductions and greetings between GKPS school and Margarita Orphanage.
- To identify first hand areas of need and where our school/students could be of assistance.
- To establish relationships with the church through the Bishop.
- To identify communication channels through which the students can initiate contact with GKPS students.
- To initiate discussion in the development of a MOU.
- To worship together as brothers and sisters in Christ.
- And to identify with and embrace people of social, cultural and economic difference.

This experience we felt would be of great benefit to us as our students would be able to learn much about the Indonesian culture, tradition and way of life. Additionally, the staff and students of GKPS would also be able to learn much about Australian schooling and our version of best pedagogic practice but more so about the idiosyncrasies of Australian tradition we take for granted. Our hope was for our staff and students to interact in such a way that we would all teach each other about each other.

The next challenge was the development of acquaintances to set up the partnership, which the LEA provided guidance with. They became the liaison with the GKPS church, who in turn worked alongside the school to make this happen. They put us in contact with liaison officer, Ridwin Purba who became the GKPS liaison between the church and us. This proved to be one of the greatest supports we could ever have asked for. Indonesian born and bred, Ridwin was a member of the GKPS church and, with our input set up the itinerary for both a reconnaissance visit as well as for the trip that would see us taking 10 students and 4 staff members on this adventure. It meant that we could rest a little easier knowing that our first trip would be as well planned as it possibly could be. This was obviously of paramount importance to us, as our very first priority was and always will be the safety of our students.

Our ‘reconnaissance’ visit was to develop a more face to face relationship with the GKPS, to work out the specific itinerary for our students but moreover to establish our duty of care and risk analysis which could not be done in all honesty without first embarking on the trip ourselves. As part of a Long Service Leave holiday we attached a visit to Indonesia to the plans. During this time we were able to visit the School and Orphanage, meet with the
Bishop and other key people affiliated with the GKPS Church and check out accommodation, food, travel and anything else we needed to do, knowing that we had a duty of care to 10 students a few months later. We needed to come home to a meeting with parents who would want to know that all details had been arranged for the express purpose of safety and learning as paramount.

Throughout our reconnaissance visit we met with the key stakeholders in Indonesia and in doing so fine tuned our itinerary, knowing that serving and learning were our key objectives. We visited the Guest House, Hotel, School and Orphanage and considered its suitability for our students, took many photos and engaged in conversations that would allow the people to know what we needed them to do (and, in turn what they needed us to do) in order for the trip to be the ideal experience for both our students. On the flip side we gave presentations to the Bishop, key church members and educators giving history and information about Navigator College, Lutheran Education in Australia and schooling in general. We could all see that this partnership was going to benefit all of us.

The GKPS High School have had a decline in numbers over recent years, from 900 to around 300 students. The authorities suggest this has been due to the lack of quality of education and lack of resources the school has. They are looking to Navigator College and our partnership school relationship to build a level of status in the area and to hopefully help the numbers to rise. They also see that we can help them with resources as well as perhaps teaching methodologies that will help to enhance the quality of education. The Bishop, Superintendent and Headmaster expressed their hopes that we will be able to support the school (GKPS) with ideas, structures and examples. We suggested that our teaching staff would teach whilst they are there, as would our students. The Orphanage on the other hand is doing well, having a number of sponsors from other Lutheran and church affiliations. However the Orphanage Director felt that they could benefit from student support with activities such as gardening, cleaning, cooking, games, teaching English, teaching computing, and teaching sports.

Throughout the visit, the places we went to, the experiences we were given, we were witness to many highlights. We were treated like royalty, welcomed into their cultural family with specific rituals and traditions and, additionally, we were asked to pray for the partnership between us to be blessed. We saw incredible poverty superseded by the Indonesian people's attitude to make the most of what they have. They are truly an amazing culture. From an outsider looking in it is such a humbling experience.

We became filled with much excitement and enthusiasm about our new endeavor. We wanted the students to enjoy the opportunity; we believed they would experience a culture that they could learn from; we felt that at times there could be cultural experiences they could be shocked with; we believed that they would be able to provide support and teaching opportunities to the students of the GKPS High School and Margaritha Orphanage; and we hoped that after the experience they would come home appreciating all that God has blessed them with.
The Reality...........

There was a lot of apprehension behind our trip when the reality of taking 10 students who weren’t our own came to the fore, however the cohort of students were such that we hoped they would rise to the challenges before them. Many of them had little or no idea of what was about to happen as we were not ideally sure of the process of what exactly would happen in each place. There was an understanding that there could be misinterpretation between language differences as well the possibility that each of the places we were to visit may have had a different belief of what we were going to do. Sure there had been discussions through email but even these can be subject to an element of misinterpretation.

From the Navigator College student's side there were varying reasons why they wanted to go. The astute ones suggested they wanted to 'make a difference' but through later conversations with them some just wanted an overseas experience. None of them knew what was in store and some even struggled to fully understand the definition of 'service learning, - serving God through serving others and learning from and with one another within a different culture. We could explain the simple facilities, we could suggest there would be early mornings and later nights, we could even suggest no hot water for showering and squat toilets but nothing prepared them for the change in the creature comforts of home. Still, the positive attitude was one I was more than impressed with and this was the perfect attitude to head towards our adventure.

By the first evening in Kuala Lumpur we were ready to explain to our students the 'grace bucket.' With the excitement came energy and with energy came a challenge to gently push boundaries. However, setting the standard and defining the 'grace bucket was a powerful one. Put simply, we suggested that the size and depth of the grace bucket was up to them. It could be full or it could be empty. If it was full there would be opportunities for them to be given more independence and perhaps some special privileges, however when there was silliness, tardiness, chatting when we needed them to be quiet and general relaxed behavior the grace bucket would start to drain and they would see less independence and privileges. It was a simple way of explaining to all our students that we wanted to enjoy ourselves too and the best way for that to happen was to set positive practices in place from the start.
Despite the fact that we were sharing our hotel with the Harley Davidson motor cycle club and the apprehension and tension this brought to us as group leaders, Medan was an important initiation into the tour. Whist staying in one of the newest hotels in the city the students were able to experience a modest example of what they were going to encounter over the next 12 days. With our guides Basa and Ridwin we walked through the chaos of traffic, had lunch on the pavement and walked through the local markets. This first experience, although sedate, challenged the students. One student commented on the walk to the hotel “I didn’t cope with any of the markets but I think it was a great experience now that I think back to it.” These experiences set the tone for our increasing rural experiences to come.

The next day we set off by bus to Pematangsiantar where we would stay 4 nights. We spent the Sunday morning in Worship with the GKPS Church and afterward some sharing with the youth, after which we wandered to town seeing the sights and absorbing the atmosphere in the markets. Later that day we went to the BKM Orphanage where we met the children, ranging from 4 years to 19 years old. This was a great opportunity to get to know them all with gifts, games, sports and general sharing. We spent the next two days at the Orphanage, teaching English and Aussie Rules football to the children and generally helping out with gardening, fishing and other chores. However it was watching the relationships that were built between our students and the children there that was amazing to see. There is something special when children meet children. Barriers are broken down more easily and relationships develop more readily. There were many sad histories that had resulted in the children finding a home at BKM, ranging from parents missing after the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami, to parents feeling their children had a better life at the Orphanage, to stories of abuse. All of them touched the hearts of our students as these children seemed to make the most of their situation and reach out to them with love. Every night as we debriefed the day and finished with Devotion we thanked God for the incredible work of so many who make such a difference to the lives of the children in their care. It was a very emotional time for our Navigator students but it was also a time to feel blessed that we had become a part of it.

After our time at the BKM Orphanage we headed to Pematanggraya where we were to visit the SMA GKPS (Secondary) School and the boarding house close by. We were greatly honoured by the official part of our visit with an acknowledging banner, a welcoming ceremony and a special luncheon. During the ceremony we were able to give our gifts, ranging from musical instruments, sporting equipment and books and we received a wonderful honour of receiving a Ulos each which acknowledged our becoming family with the student family of SMA GKPS school. In addition the Bishop and I officially opened a Language Lab and a Science Lab, the result of a Government grant to improve facilities as a direct result of our school partnership.

The next few days spent at the SMA GKPS School were nothing short of amazing. Our students’ days started with breakfast at 6:30am, followed by handshake welcoming every individual student and staff member at 7 am. We shared in whole school worship and from there we all taught English to up to 50 students at a time with a time frame of up to 3 hours each session and around 2 sessions each day. We were also involved in Simulagan cultural activities including dancing, singing, basket weaving and sport, including teaching Aussie Rules football to the SMA GKPS students and staff.

One of the greatest realizations was when we were asked to share our Australian culture. If ‘culture’ is defined as the way we do things, what is a true Australian culture? Our answer through this level of sharing is that we actually don’t have one. We see ourselves
as multicultural and we would be right but true traditional culture eludes many Australians (with the exception of Indigenous Australians) because we have family histories that come from all over the world. Only the Aboriginal culture has a general history to be shared and that culture is not the culture of our group, as largely non-Indigenous people. Whilst we were inspired by the beautiful singing (with 3 part harmony), awestruck by the fabulous traditional dancing and encouraged by the traditional Simulagan music we felt extremely blessed to witness the outpouring of amazing real culture that is lived by these people each day. Our response to the group in return had to be one that explained that we were unable to share our Australian culture, as many of us were too young to the country. We all had grandparents who came from all over the world, each with their own countries' traditions and culture, making us 'multicultural'. However, in doing so we had not been able to develop levels of tradition that these people had who had lived for many generations in the same place. It was an eye opening realization to some of us that perhaps these people had got culture 'right'. One of the ways we worked around our presentation was to highlight our God who blesses us each day with music through worship, messages and stories through songs and the cross as our traditional dress. We shared some songs that we sing each week at Chapel and taught them the words and actions that we use. This became our response to culture.

It’s interesting when I refer to culture and where Australia fits when describing our Australian culture when I also remember the way I felt to be initiated into the Saragih family of the Simalungun group. The way it was described to me was that within the Simalungun’s there are 4 clans, one of which is Saragih. Simalunguns will have one of these 4 surnames and are not allowed to marry within these clans. Whilst I was at the SMA GKPS school in July I was initiated into the Simalungun Saragih clan, making me the sister to the Principal of the school, and in fact to any other Saraghi clan member. It was an incredible honour and one I felt a privileged to be a part of. My name became Kaye Mathwin-Cox, Buru Saragih, which I used throughout my time in Indonesia.

One of the many blessings that we received was the privilege of living in the SMA GKPS girl’s dormitory for 4 nights. We were witness to God’s work and the people who work to this glory in this place. We witnessed commitment to Him, devotion to His Word and a strong desire to do His will. Even now as I sit here writing this piece I am finding it hard to describe my experience to give it true justice. The routine was tough and I would doubt if our Australian students would cope with such a routine long term. Yet the love they receive from each other and from their supervisors showed God in all that was done for them. The staff expected the children to work hard, study hard, pray hard and play (sing) hard but in everything they did it was to His glory. One night we were treated to a presentation of traditional dancing and singing by the girls. It was wonderful to be witness to. However I was drawn to tears when the next night we were presented with a sarong each as a direct result of a passing inquiry into why the girls changed into sarongs at the end of each day to study and questioning as to how these were tied. These people have next to no money yet they made sure we had something special that we had an interest in. This is a gift I will treasure.

For these people their main goal is to learn to speak English as well as they can. To learn English means doors will be opened: to university, to better jobs and better opportunities. The students had a drive and passion to improve their position and to make the most of their situation. All this at such a young age. Wow! We learnt that many of even the brightest students will never be able to make it to University. There are very few scholarships and those students that cannot get a scholarship have to rely on the finances of their family. There are no deferred payments in Indonesian universities, only up front
payments and many families just cannot even consider university for their child/ren. It broke my heart to think of the academic potential that will be left untapped just because of circumstance. I am still struggling to find a solution, as these kids deserve more.

Other highlights of the trip were listening to the GKPS Youth Gospel Choir and a real highlight was a visit to a family of Ulos Weavers. These families work incredibly hard for their living, yet again, it is true testimony to the Indonesian people as they make the most of their situation and work to the best of their ability for a small payment. Our students tried the weaving machines and discovered just how difficult it was to use their feet and hands simultaneously, whilst making a creative pattern out of cotton. It was incredible.

After a very emotional goodbye to the students and staff of the GKPS boarding house and the school we headed off to Lake Toba, to the Toledo Resort, in order to give the students some well-deserved rest and to debrief about the trip. To conclude the tour in the way that it started was fantastic. (Here once again we shared the facility with an beer guzzling group, for the annual convention of the ‘Horas Hash’.) We were able to relax give the students freedom and allow us time to debrief the experiences we all had. This time also allowed the principals of both schools to share their experiences and directions for the next visit. The next 2 days and 2 nights were spent in workshop sessions, considering the enormity of what we had done and in devotion to thank our God for the amazing learning we had encountered. I must say the responses from our students by way of; wanting to stay and support the Orphanage and High School students, considering teaching as well as mission work for future vocation possibilities in the years to come, to wondering if they may revisit in their gap year, to comments to suggest the experience was ‘life changing’ and one they will never forget, left us as leaders speechless. We knew and hoped they would be affected by their visit but by no way realized the extent to which they wanted to change their lives for the better. The culture shock reversal was one that led them to realize the importance of family relationships, to appreciate the blessings they have in their own lives and to want to make a difference in the lives of those who are not as fortunate as they are. We could not have ever imagined the results of this endeavor could have been as purposeful as they had been.

I have to say I cannot express how incredibly proud I have been of these students. All our Year 11 students were offered this opportunity and we were prepared to take every person that wanted to join in this journey. Some of these students paid their own way, others paid part, whilst other families took on extra jobs to pay for the experience. We were happy for any student that wanted to join us to participate. What we got was a group of students who wanted to be there and were prepared to go out of their comfort zone to make a difference to the lives of others. These students ate food they could never have imagined eating, took risks they would never in ordinary circumstances have considered taking and worked harder than I have ever seen them work. And in all of this they had fun. Their attitude was incredibly positive, their enthusiasm energetic and their empathy real. They set a standard that we as leaders could never have wished for. They blessed the hearts of so many and in doing so changed lives in the process. What an amazing experience! I thank God for the privilege of being part of it.

Kaye Mathwin-Cox
PRINCIPAL