

## OVERVIEW OF FIELD VISITS TO WESTERN AND SOUTH CENTRAL PROVINCES October 5 – 14<sup>th</sup>

As I think of our 'field visits' to the **Western and South Central Provinces of Ireland**, my mind is a kaleidoscope of friendly faces, different place names, inspiring work for justice, warm welcomes, humbling learning opportunities and many cups of tea! The following is a very brief overview of what proved to be a valuable opportunity for mutual learning, as a means of offering support and working together to address systemic injustice

Sr. Denise Boyle fmdm, MIA-Global Action office in Dublin, was joined by Sr. Angela Reed rsm from our office in NY for the two field visits, which had a threefold aim: To meet the Sisters; to hear about and see firsthand their work for justice; and to share the Global Action programme. This includes highlighting the justice issues being addressed at the UN, on behalf of the Mercy Family.

Our visit to the **Western Province** started in Ballinasloe, where we met with the Provincial Leadership Team (PLT) in an enriching, open meeting that set the context for the field visit. We drove to Portumna to see '**An Gairdin**' the Organic Garden and Ecology Centre, where amidst the beauty of nature, we spent time with those making the 'dream' a reality!

In Galway we met with a number of Sisters and the following morning gave the first of our presentations. Designed to be interactive we found that in each venue the responses and questions to the presentation reflected the rich, diverse ministry experiences of the participants. Age, we realised again, is no barrier to involvement, knowledge of, or interest in both local and global justice issues. It was humbling to listen to Sisters and their Colleagues share their work for justice, concern for the environment and the most vulnerable. The variety of issues that the Mercy Family is responding to is inspiring.

Castlebar beckoned, so we drove north to '**Ard Bhride**', where we met with those very active in supporting the NGO called **VITA**, which the Western Province is partnered with in Ethiopia. The project works towards sustainable development to alleviate hunger and mitigate against climate change. We were delighted to receive a copy of '*Walking Gently on Earth*', which documents how the Mercy Family is living out individually and collectively, '*the founding call to be a compassionate presence on Earth, in communion with all creation*' p.6. For its commitment to embrace sustainable living, the Province received the **Eco-Congregation Award** in 2016 – VITA nominated the Province for this prestigious award.

Later we had a productive meeting with those actively engaged with the Congregation initiative, **MECPATHS** (Mercy End Child Prostitution and Trafficking in the Hospitality Sector), before giving a presentation to all the Sisters. Next morning in Carrick-on-Shannon, we met Sr. Nora Burke, the Justice Coordinator for the Province, who shared the work for justice that Mercy members are engaged in. This includes accompanying refugees, families of prisoners, youth, environmental issues and continuing involvement with 'Fairtrade' that she promotes throughout the Province. With Nora we travelled to the '**Galilee Retreat Centre**' in Boyle, to share our presentation with the group who participate in the annual spirituality programme organised by the Sisters.

Athlone was next. Next morning we shared our presentation with those gathered in Dún Mhuire and from there drove to Longford Convent for our final gathering, where we had a

lively discussion. We are grateful to Sr Anna Burke PLT member, who organised our schedule and to everyone who implemented it with kindness and interest. The valuable learnings and enriching exchanges we had during our visit will always remain with us, thank you!

The 'field visit' to the **South Central Province** began in Limerick, where we met with the Team of '**Doras Luimni**', the NGO set up by Mercy to support and promote the human rights of migrants. After an informative session we walked to the '**Bedford Row Project**', where families of prisoners are supported through a variety of programmes and prisoners are assisted to keep in close contact with their families whilst in prison. This is a joint Mercy-Franciscan initiative, as the project is housed in the old friary.

Over lunch in the '**Limerick Youth Centre**' we met with those who established and are running the '**Fairtrade**' initiative here and further afield. The youth project offers young people who dropped out of school an alternative to traditional schooling with an emphasis on skills training. Next was a short visit to the '**Re-generation Project in Moyross**', cited as the most disadvantaged community in Ireland. Mercy Sisters helped set this up and today some Sisters continue to accompany and offer ongoing support as 'Community Companions'. Later we had the wondrous experience of being driven through the Burren, meaning 'stony place', an apt description of this limestone plateau with its unique flora in North Clare. We drove to Mount St. Anne's, Portarlington, to be ready for the following day.

In the morning we met with representatives of the **MECPATH** Project in the Province, who spoke of their achievements and the challenges they are facing in promoting this important child-centred initiative. The next meeting was with members of the Justice Advisory group who shared their programme designed to raise awareness of key environmental issues and support for third world projects. Angela and Denise then shared their presentation with participants from across the Province. A valuable discussion ensued that ended with the call to lunch! Later we met some of the prison chaplains, to hear of their unique ministry and networking on behalf of prisoners. This was followed by a meeting with the group engaged with MIRP (Mercy International Reflection Process). There is excitement re how this dynamic process is unfolding, within the Provinces and across the globe.

In Naas we met the Provincial Leadership Team who reflected through an inspiring power point presentation, how the work for justice is an integral part of Province life. Angela had to return to NY next morning so Denise continued alone. Her first meeting was in Athy with students and staff engaged in the successful justice project initiative in **Ard Scoil na Trionóide**, followed by a visit to the housing estate where Traveller families have settled and are supported by Sisters and Co-workers. Hearing of their courage and determination to integrate into the community, in the face of ongoing discrimination was inspiring.

A meeting with members of the **St. Michael's Regeneration Project** in Inchicore, Dublin followed. Their response to the needs of women in the community is diverse, focused and owes its success to those who have their 'finger on the pulse' and engage fully with the community. The day concluded with a most informative meeting at the '**Mercy Law Resource Centre**' in Dublin city. Lawyers and their co-workers endeavour to respond to the demand for housing for those who come from very distressing circumstances. Addressing systemic injustice issues related to homelessness, within a rights based framework has led to many successful cases, but the challenges are huge and increasing!

The final visit of the trip was to '**Gairdín Beo**' (Live Garden) in Carlow. It is an example of a dynamic, organic project being implemented with the local community. An excellent talk given by a local woman, on health and nature was part of this visit.

A special thank you to Sr. Clare Gunning, PLT member, who coordinated our visit and to everyone involved in arranging the various meetings. Our field visit in the South Central Province proved to be a most insightful, enriching and challenging experience – thank you!

Denise Boyle fmdm

24<sup>th</sup> October 2017

South Central Province – Symbol



Western Province