

Grassroots Ministry: Mercy and the Displacement of Persons

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I would like to begin this reflection with a very well-known *Maori* (indigenous people of New Zealand) Proverb:

Maku e ki atu, he aha te mea nui o te ao? He Tangata, he Tangata, he Tangata.

You ask, what is the most important thing in the world? It is People, it is People, it is people. This proverb for me speaks volumes of our Mercy ministries around the world and why we, as Mercy Sisters care so much about the things that affect the lives of people, especially those whom Pope Francis constantly calls us to care for; ‘the poor’ in every sense of the word.

The displacement of persons in Samoa as in different parts of the Pacific and perhaps in other parts of the world too is due to various factors. It varies from place to place and time to time, and with different issues and causes. This reflection focuses on Samoa and the issue of climate change causing natural disasters which continuously affect the world.

Currently, Salome Ioane rsm and I are working on a project with some people who have been harshly affected by one of these devastating natural disasters, the tsunami which hit Samoa and its neighbouring countries in 2009. This project is planting trees on lands near the coasts of Saleapaga, (one of the villages badly hit by the 2009 tsunami) which the conference participants visited. This project is generously funded by the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of North Sydney, Australia and supported by the *Nga Whaea Atawhai o Aotearoa* – Sisters of Mercy, New Zealand.

Our current involvement in this project with the Saleapaga people, namely the Catholic community, is the result of our Mercy Asia-Pacific Conference held in Samoa in November 2018. The conference did give us the opportunity to really touch base with some of our most vulnerable people and their harsh realities. It has also provided for our people the opportunity to showcase some important aspects of our/their culture and hospitality. This was through the welcome kava ceremony, the entertainment, food and most importantly the sharing of their personal stories in relation to our theme; ***Degradation of the Earth and the Displacement of Persons.***

The conference was also an opportunity for the participating Sisters of Mercy from eight different countries to experience our culture first hand in its authenticity, explore and learn about how climate change and the issues of environment crisis and natural disasters are affecting the Pacific. These were done mainly through listening to the local people, who shared their expertise, knowledge and experience with our group. It also raised awareness

and educated our people about the work and ministries of the Sisters of Mercy, not just in the Pacific but also around the world; that it is not just teaching and caring for the sick as we do in Samoa but it is also caring for our environment and our planet Earth.

Most of the participants felt that It was the sharing of knowledge and the story telling of these local people which became the most memorable and valuable experience for us (me included). The story of the 2009 tsunami was probably the most shared and talked about topic. Personally, I was not in Samoa when the tsunami devastated our Pacific Island nation and other Pacific Islands nations on September 29th, 2009. Although I watched and listened to the news, read on newspapers and many online articles, it was a different thing hearing from the victims themselves. I would like to share just a few quotes from what they shared with us:

“I looked to one side and saw a wave coming straight. Then it joined with another one and ruined all houses in the middle of the village.”

“One wave came from the east and almost totally covered the road. It came in sideways and moved inland pushing everything with it. The second one followed and it was about 60 feet high.”

“It was like a snap of a finger, a split second. When the second wave came in, it hit like a punch and we could hear the roar, the sound of the coral and the rocks rolling.”

“The first wave came inland, taking everything in its path. The second one just stacked up on top of it and the water just kept getting higher and higher. The waves kept coming and coming and stopped only when they reached the base of the mountains.”

“The last wave was the biggest. It took houses and trees with it, leaving the area looking as desolate as a war zone. Those of us who managed to escape to the top of the mountains remembered looking back, seeing people being washed away and hearing screaming. I know this sight and sound will stay with me for as long as I live.”

The aftermath of this devastating disaster meant people of the affected villages became homeless for months and even the years which followed for some. It meant people had to leave their ancestral lands by the coast where their ancestors are buried and moved inland. It meant rebuilding their lives and those of their children and grandchildren on new areas. It meant building new relationships with members of their extended families and learning to live in harmony with and among new neighbours. Some have even decided to make complete moves out of Samoa and have settled in countries like Australia, New Zealand and even the United States of America.

As a Sister of Mercy, it has been an enriching experience to hear their stories. For them, it was the first time since the tsunami that they have been provided with an opportunity to recall the painful event of the past and share them with a big group of women who attentively listened to their stories with empathy, love and non-judgemental. It was the first time for them to experience such a healing experience.

One of them was an older woman who talked about how she lost three grandchildren on this day. She was supposed to look after them as their parents had gone to work in the plantation. She painfully talked through tears about how she desperately tried to hold on to her beloved grandchildren. One by one the waves ripped them off her arms. She too thought that this was the end of the world for her also. Miraculously, she survived. She and her family had been displaced by this tsunami and had to start all over again on another family land further up on higher grounds. When asked whether she will ever return to her coastal land, she was not quite sure. She is hoping that one day, may be one of her children or grandchildren will do that. I believe there are many other village residents in the same situation.

When we asked them how they would like us, (the Sisters of Mercy) to support them, their response was, to please come back. Salome and I laughed because we knew it meant; “we don’t know how you can help us” and “most of you come from overseas, so we know you will never come back”. We did promise them that we will go back to see them and check on them. Luckily for me, my own village is not too far from Saleapaga, just about ten to fifteen minutes’ drive, so I have been back and saw them. On one of my visits, the catechists talked about how bare the lands still are and they need some trees. I agreed and left it at that because I did not want to make any promise that I would not be able to follow through.

Sisters of Mercy - North Sydney, Australia and the Tree Planting Project.

In July 2019, Salome and I received an invitation from Sr. Loreto Conroy rsm (North Sydney Sisters of Mercy Congregation Leader) through Sr. Katrina Fabish rsm (our former congregation leader) to go over to Sydney to share with their Sisters about the Mercy Asia-Pacific conference. At the end of our presentation, the North Sydney Sisters asked us the same question the participants of the 2018 Asia Pacific Conference asked the Saleapaga people; “What can we do to help?” Luckily for us we knew what the people had asked for; trees to plant on their dry bare costal lands. Hence, the Saleapaga Tree Planting Project was born. May I now publicly acknowledge and thank you Loreto and the North Sydney Congregation for your generous donation. In December last year, I have purchased over 300 trees and the people planted them. Some trees have survived and others didn’t. Some photos of plants / trees are in the power-point presentation. We are still experimenting to find which trees can survive best on this land at this point and we are doing it section by section (a suggestion from the people themselves). The people of Saleapaga do appreciate it. Thank you!