



## Samoa Gathering 19-25 November 2018

The first ever gathering of Sisters of Mercy from the Asia Pacific region arose from two strands – firstly, from a regional meeting of Asia Pacific Sisters of Mercy Leaders in 2017 and, secondly, from a desire to build on what has been learnt from the Mercy International Reflection Process (MIRP). Three main ongoing purposes underpinned our gathering:

1. To deepen understanding of the reality in the Asia Pacific region of the two MIRP directions of Degradation of Earth and Displacement of People.
2. To come to know each other, build relationships and act to take forward what has been revealed and learnt from MIRP.
3. To strengthen our relationship in this region with Mercy Global Presence at our United Nations Organisation office and from the Asia Pacific region to support our Mercy ministry there.

Our Mercy Asia Pacific gathering was the first meeting in Samoa of faith-based people coming together on climate change and displacement of peoples. Archbishop Alapati Lui Mata'eliga acknowledged this by his presence at Samoan Welcome Ava Ceremony and by inviting us to a special Sunday Vigil Mass at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception at which he presided. Our three quest speakers expressed appreciation of the significance of our gathering and they were delighted to be invited to speak.

Those who gathered are grateful for the vision of our regional leaders, and especially Katrina Fabish rsm who was unable to be present, who initiated this gathering. The dedicated and hard-working planning committee made the gathering possible. Malia Fetuli rsm and Salome Loane rsm were outstanding in all things related to our time in Samoa - the venue, the welcome, hospitality, visits to regions, speakers and transport. The contributions of Maryanne Loughry rsm and Richard Kerr-Bell were greatly appreciated.

For our personal and communal prayer and reflection, we drew on the daily Reflection Series prepared by Veronica Lawson RSM. These linked us to the gospel of the day, MIRP and the recently produced MIRP Guide for Using the Process and the Themes of *Laudato Si', On Care for Our Common Home*. Each region prepared a morning prayer time.

### **PARTICIPANTS:**

Australia: Maria Lawton rsm, Maryanne Loughry rsm, Anne McGuire rsm, Ms Ellen Geraghty

Guam: Marian Arroyo rsm

Aotearoa New Zealand: Bridget Crisp rsm, Kathleen Rushton rsm

Papua New Guinea: Schola Fakiwi rsm, Rachel Waisman rsm

Philippines: Patrocina Angay rsm, Jean Delgado rsm, Marge Alamban rsm, Corazon Basadre rsm

Samoa: Malia Fetuli rsm, Marieta Ifopo rsm, Salome Loane rsm

Tonga: Malia Simeone rsm, Fe'ao Kautai rsm

MIA Mercy Global Action at the UNO Office, New York, USA: Angela Reed rsm

Supported by: Judith Moroney rsm, Leadership Team Sisters of Mercy Aotearoa New Zealand

Facilitator: Richard Kerr-Bell, Kaihautu Wairua-Mission Leader, Sisters of Mercy Aotearoa New Zealand. Mr Sanjay Theodore assisted with film.

The setting of St Therese Retreat Centre where we gathered is very attractive.  
(<http://www.stthereseretreatsamoa.com/>)

### **AVA O LE FEILOAIGA ('KAVA')/SAMOAN WELCOME AVA CEREMONY**

The warm hospitality and welcome of our Sisters in Samoa have surrounded us. We were inserted further into their life and community during the 'ava' or kava ceremony. During this ancient ritual which is performed at the beginning of all important gatherings, we were supported by the Chief of Leulumoega village, Leiataua Iosefo who has a long association with the Sisters of Mercy. His father welcomed the first Sisters in 1972. Archbishop Alapati Lui Mata'eliga presided. The fourth-year students of Moamoa Theological College, where Malia Fetuli RSM teaches, participated in this moving ceremony. We were treated to a lively Faafiafaiga (cultural performance) by St. Joan of Arc Primary School, a Mercy school where Marieta Ifopo RSM and Malia Fetuli RSM teach.

### **TOUR OF THE ISLAND AND LISTENING TO LOCAL STORIES**

After a two-hour drive through villages which line the beautiful coastline beyond Apia, the capital of Samoa, we climbed inland over steep bush-covered hillsides to descend to the coastal region of Saleapaga and Lepā which were affected by the devastating tsunami of 29 October, 2009 which caused 192 deaths in Samoa. The cost of damage is an estimated US \$200 million. Our purpose was to meet with local people whose lives had been changed forever.

Paulo, the Catholic Parish catechist welcomed us to the village of Saleapaga which is situated on a narrow strip of coast between the sea and very steep forest covered hillsides. Three women survivors spoke. After a massive earthquake, villagers saw a never previously experienced sight. Within five minutes, the sea receded hundreds of metres and then returned in three consecutive waves which increased in size. Totally unfamiliar with a tsunami, the villagers rushed out towards the incoming wave which was up to their knees. The second wave was so high people had to swim. They saw the hillsides ahead of them collapsing. The third wave, as high as tree tops, washed over their homes and buildings. People survived by clinging to trees, the remains of buildings or climbing on to floating items. The area around their church and Mary's grotto remained uncovered by water. Those who remained there were safe.

One survivor lost four grandchildren. Another thought she had all her family with her only to discover her 75-year-old mother was missing. Later, she was founded in the water clinging to a tree and survived. Escape to high ground was hindered by the steep forested covered hillsides. The displaced villagers later salvaged parts of wrecked houses to build shelters on the high ground of the lush plantations where many have remained as they are afraid to live on the coast. Some have returned.

Later we lunched, and some swam, at Manusina Beach Fales where the owner told of his experience of losing his business and rebuilding. Our return journey was delayed by an hour as one of the vans became stuck in the soft sand!

### ***Some of our Reflections:***

- Deeply moved by hearing the stories of those who survived the tsunami and how they remain traumatised to this day, despite rebuilding of their lives - inspiring and very moving

- Amazed at the resilience of the people
- Proud of my culture's hospitality and generosity
- God's beauty if all around
- The resilient human spirit is empowered by deep faith and trust in God
- Real people, real life
- Tsunami – a term that seems confined to those forgotten and ignored by powerful people and nations.
- The miracle of the Church and stature of Our Lady
- Spiritual resilience

## **PRESENTATIONS – SAMOAN SPEAKERS**

### **South Pacific Regional Environmental Program (SPREP)**

Siosina Lui of the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program spoke about this impressive intergovernmental agency of the twenty-one island nations and territories. The climate resilience program, mandated to promote co-operation, focuses on “sustaining our livelihoods and natural heritage in harmony with our culture.” These nations, comprising 30,000 islands, are situated in ten percent of the world's ocean. Siosina emphasised that every island is unique and the issues of resilience are complex. Consequently, SPREP works with people whose resilience is grounded in their culture and local knowledge. Resilience is every one's business.

After giving an overview of what is already happening and what is likely to happen, Siosina described the significant change in SPREP's direction. Now both the issues of climate change sustainability and disaster relief/risk management are together in the Framework for Pacific Resilient Development (FRDP) 2017-2030. This is a crucial way forward as previously these two areas were addressed separately. For the SPREP Report, see <http://www.sprep.org>

In answer to the question: What would be the core message from SPREP to those of us gathered here? Siosina replied to advocate for 1.5 degree reduction rather 2 degrees.

### ***Some of our Reflections:***

- Inspired and uplifted by SPREP
- Foundation – culture and values very important
- What can we do differently in our own backyards?
- enlightening to hear amplified voices of local people unfiltered by western media
- we are informed, we have heard, we are more committed
- people at the grassroots will turn the tide
- SPREP is flourishing among island nations – may the nations of the north co-operate with a similar intergovernmental organisation rather than reject expert knowledge e.g., IPCC Report
- Never give up on climate change advocacy - the power of one
- Role of the churches and the baptised?
- Challenged to do more in Mercy Schools and Partnerships on resilience and climate change

### **Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MNRE)**

Lameko Talia, Principal Scientific Officer of the Samoa Metrology Division of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment gave an excellent geological overview of Samoa which is geographically very young (2-5 million years). This island nation, situated on the Pacific Ring of Fire, is affected by the Samoa-Tonga Trench, shallow earthquakes which cause tsunamis, and active volcanoes (Hot Spot Theory). Lameka explained the extensive Seismic Network of Recording Stations which was set up set up after the 2009 tsunami which caused 192 deaths in Samoa and Tonga.

***Some of our Reflections:***

- Earth has evolving processes. We need to understand and be part of Earth, not against Earth
- Learning about Earth movements, tectonic plates, trenches, Pacific Ring of Fire
- How important it is to have some technical knowledge and to use correct terms about climate change so as not to “undercut” or “belittle” scientific facts
- Refreshing to hear from experts who know their craft and can advise us accordingly
- Impressed by the professionalism of our visiting speakers – we have much to learn from our Pacific neighbours

**Caritas Samoa - Board Member Sala Josephine Fiu**

Sala Josephine Fiu, a lawyer who worked previously in the legal division of the Ministry of Environment is an active member of the Commission of Environmental Law (IUCN). Sala works locally using her vast experience in social, environmental and legal issues. She impressed on us the crucial part local action plays at forefront of climate change and displacement of peoples. A founding member of Samoa Conservation Society Inc, she serves currently on the executive as a Vice President. This NGO focuses on planting trees and trains young people to adopt green methods. (See, <https://samoaconservationsociety.wordpress.com>)

Caritas Samoa, which has been very active following the 2009 tsunami, is partnered with 24 agencies and has a memorandum of understanding with Caritas Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Over 100 young people have been trained not only for disasters but to provide environmental support. Efforts are made to make people in parishes aware of Caritas. As a committed Catholic, Sala recognises the influence priests and ministers have on people yet there is not enough push from the church towards preventive measures. Emphasis is on responding to disasters. The push of Caritas is humanitarian which raises questions as to whether Caritas is the agency to deal with the education bishops and priests who need to take lead from Pope Francis. The Church needs to be at the forefront because people are important. Politicians are concerned about re-election so often focus on quick fix solutions. In protecting the coast, for example, mangroves are more effective than building sea walls. In the long term, better to have clergy influencing their people to plant mangroves.

Pacific leaders, especially Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marianas, working as the negotiation block of Small Island Development States (SIDS) have advocated for their islands and people but there is a real need to do more. The 2014 Samoan Pathway document ([www.sids2014.org](http://www.sids2014.org)) calls on nations in the Pacific to push for partners to sign up on climate change. The voice of the Pacific is weakened because Australia and New Zealand (developed nations) do not speak with them. They leave the Pacific and join the powerful nations. Emission targets are not being followed. There needs to be an international court to check/hold to account countries who do not meet the Koyoto Protocol and to enforce the Paris Agreement. Instead, more and more countries are increasing development. Emission targets are being captured – like a fever that is trapped, very hot and sick. Earth is not healing. The most developed countries are greatest polluters. There can be no more business as usual. The role of Pope Francis and religious leaders is crucial. In answer to the question: What would be the core message to those of us gathered here? Sala replied: “Advocate to enforce the Paris Agreement.”

***Some of our Reflections:***

- Sala – a wise graced woman
- A challenging heart felt presentation
- Role of Church – place people first
- Role of Religious Women
- Reminds me how simple I am yet very important to be a voice in my little way for environmental concern

## **SHARING STORIES FROM OUR REGION**

### **Australia**

Anne McGuire rsm, Ms Ellen Geraghty and Maria Lawton rsm told the story of the relationship between Australia and its people – from that of the First Australians, and their sense of belonging to the land, to the disruption of this relationship by the arrival of European settlers in 1788, and the resulting change to land management techniques which have exacerbated the impacts of climate change and natural disasters. Australians' disconnect from the land has been exacerbated by urbanisation, which has largely allowed them to avoid direct experience of the impacts of climate change and worsening natural disasters. In turn, this has meant that there is little political impetus for change to Australia's poor or non-existent climate-related policies. In recent years there has been some growth in grassroots recognition of the value of First Australians' knowledge and the importance of relationship with land and care for the Earth, however, this is not evident in government policy. As a result, many have begun taking matters into their own hands through individual action or by working together in NGOs, social enterprise and faith-based organisations.

### **Aotearoa New Zealand**

Bridget Crisp rsm provided the gathering with an overview of the changes New Zealand has experienced as a result of a changing climate. These include increasing prices of fruit and vegetables and threats to biodiversity, but most significantly, Bridget noted that there has been one severe or more extreme weather event (including storms or heavy rainfall leading to burst dams and riverbanks) every month of 2018. With two-thirds of the New Zealand population living in areas prone to flooding, the increase in such weather events is already impacting the population and this is likely to increase into the future. Bridget, also, told of the impact of the devastating Kaikoura earthquake of November 2016 and subsequent recovery efforts.

New Zealand has a strong renewable energy sector. The country's primary contribution to global warming at present is methane produced by agriculture, which scientists are now beginning to address.

### **Philippines (USA)**

With 82.5% of the population of the Philippines vulnerable to typhoons, and 70% of its municipalities dependent on coastline and marine ecosystems for their livelihoods, Patrocina Angay rsm and Jean Delgado rsm noted that their country is the third most vulnerable to climate change in the world, after Vanuatu and Tonga. Home to a rich diversity of life, climate change is already producing typhoons, storm surges and drought which are more frequent and/or severe than they have been historically. Sea level rise is 3x higher than the global average, meaning 13.6 million Filipinos currently face forced relocation.

Given the risks climate change poses to the Philippines, and particularly its present and likely future impacts on food security, the economy, water security, housing, biodiversity, working hours and prevalence of disease, climate change has been categorised as a threat to national security.

The Philippines (USA) Sisters' ministries have been responding to these challenges in various ways, including lobbying against mining and illegal logging, modelling of organic agriculture, forest regeneration, visitation with indigenous people and those affected by mining, cleaning coastal areas of rubbish, and standing in solidarity with indigenous people struggling to reclaim their ancestral lands.

### **Papua New Guinea**

Schola Fakiwi rsm and Rachel Waisman rsm told of the impact of the forced relocation of the population (700 people) of Kadovar Island to the mainland following a volcanic eruption. These people left behind them their traditional lands and marine areas, schools, proper toilets, and were moved to

an area where they were unwanted by their neighbours had no choice but to live without desks, books or stationery for schools, and were forbidden to grow crops or fish in the sea. The challenging conditions saw breakdowns in relationships and growth in sexual violence within the group. The Papua New Guinean government is now planning to move the community to vacant land in another part of the country.

### **Philippines (Ireland)**

Marge Alamban rsm and Corazon Basadre rsm shared the devastation which their region experienced following Super Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 and a 6.5 magnitude earthquake which hit Leyte in 2016. After Super Typhoon Haiyan, which affected over 14 million individuals (41% of them children), the Philippines Sisters established the Mother of Hope Children's Centre, which provides essential services such as hygiene kits, food, clothing and school supplies to 64 street children, as well as education and capacity-building for their parents and community.

Following the Leyte earthquake, in which 1287 families from five villages were accommodated in temporary shelters, the Sisters of Mercy responded by:

- Reaching out to victims
- Coordinating assistance with other religious congregations, including food, medical/dental supplies/services
- Providing stress debriefing

They noted that the provision of basic necessities to survivors is not sufficient – that it is necessary to return their dignity as children of God to those impacted by traumatic events such as these.

### **Guam and Micronesia**

Marian Arroyo rsm provided an introduction to Guam, the US territory most remote from the continental US. Small and densely populated, Guam is the largest and most developed of the Micronesian nations. It sits among 2000 other Micronesian islands which are located in "Typhoon Alley," one of the most typhoon-active areas of the world. Climate change is already seeing an increase in the number and severity of typhoons hitting the region (two super typhoons of category 5 passed through in two months of 2018) – and this trend is likely to continue.

Another significant climate-related issue is sea level rise. In these low-lying areas, the four-inch rise in sea level observed since 1993 is already threatening fresh groundwater supplies and crops as much as a mile inland particularly in the atolls. Other issues such as loss of coral and damage caused by invasive species such as brown snakes and rhinoceros beetle are detrimental to biodiversity and important crops.

Many of these islands, Guam and the Marshall Islands in particular, are still reeling from the effects of World War II and regional wars, with nuclear contamination, contamination by Agent Orange, unexploded ordinance and sunken ships and planes continuing to infect the area.

The people of these islands are consequently experiencing displacement both within the islands (with people moving between islands) and to other lands (such as the continental US). This displacement is often accompanied by homelessness and disconnection from family and friends. The health problems which are the legacy of war and displacement have placed a heavy burden on Guam's health system, and are accompanied by a sense of disappointment that the US has not lived up to its promises under the Compact of Free Association.

### **Tonga**

The Kingdom of Tonga comprises 176 islands (36 inhabited), spread over 270,000 square miles. With a population of just over 109,000 people, some of Tonga's islands are home to active volcanos, while

low-lying islands are vulnerable to cyclones, hurricanes, tsunamis and flooding. Malia Simeone rsm and Fe'ao Kautai rsm helped participants to appreciate this vulnerability through images and video of the impact of 2018's Hurricane Gita, which reached windspeeds of 200kph (unprecedented in Tonga). They, and their fellow Tongans (via video), shared their observations of the impacts of climate change, which included changes to rainfall patterns and seasonal temperature variation, threats to freshwater supplies and food crops, sea level rise, and drought. In a country where families have been living on the same land for generations, relocation is not a simple question. At present people are responding to these changes with DIY land reclamation projects and by increasing the diversity of crops in order to strengthen their resilience to their increasingly changing situation.

## **ANALYSIS**

### **Facilitated by Angela Reed RSM. MIA Mercy Global Action UNO Office New York**

Angela began by suggesting that our experience of the last four days resonates with a sentence in the gospel of the day: "the people were spellbound by what they heard" (Lk 19:48). Our understanding of social analysis was deepened by Angela who explained and guided us through the six steps of the framework of the Mercy Justice Advocacy Approach which was developed by our Office at the UNO: Experience, Self-Reflection, Tools for Advocacy, Advocacy for Whom, Who is with us? and Advocacy Leading to Action. In our working together through these, we discovered that they are interlinked. Time permitted us only to dip into these steps in order to assist us to work towards the next steps following our Asia Pacific Gathering.

Our *experience* of degradation of earth and displacement of people had been heightened by encountering the survivors, engaging with the regional reports and with three Samoan experts. We moved to a time of *self-reflection*: Who I am? Where do I stand? What is my position? This led to group reflection.

Angela began her second session by focusing on the question we would hear proclaimed that evening at the Sunday vigil Mass: "What is truth?" (Jn 18:38). *Tools for Advocacy* include the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) which the United Nations launched to shape international development (2015-2030). To assist us in working towards action, resources committed to an aspirational agenda, such as the NGO Mining Working Group's *Water & Sanitation: A People's Guide to SDG 6: A Rights-Based Approach to Implementation* publication, are very helpful. Sisters of Mercy and partners, too, are committed to an aspirational agenda. We explored the issue of waste management to deepen our understanding of the interlinked root causes using a Social Analysis Guide (Sisters of Mercy USA 1984. Updated 2014) which we extended to include gender and family. Our insights on waste management is summed up in: there is "no away" in throw away.

We were shocked to learn from our Filipino and Papua New Guinean sisters of plastic rice, a product manufactured in China.

## **WHERE FROM HERE?**

### **Facilitated by Richard Kerr-Bell (Kaihautu Mission Leader, Sisters of Mercy Aotearoa New Zealand)**

Richard began with two Maori proverbs, "If we take care of the spiritual (relational) side of life, the physical will follow" and "The corners of the house can be seen, the corners of heart cannot be seen," to remind us that if we had not been moved by the experience of this gathering and relationships formed, nothing will happen. We, then, reflected on: What can I do? What can we as an Asia Pacific Mercy Forum do? In country groups we considered – what are the next steps? Those present were invited to offer - What I am able/willing to do to enable the forum to take the next steps?

This information will be collated and circulated to the gathering members. To continue to build relationships and connections made, much work is yet to be done in order to discern our next steps

together as a forum to advocate and act locally, within our countries and in our Asia Pacific region to take forward the two MIRP directions of Degradation of Earth and Displacement of People. Integral to this, is the mutual relationship which have been established between our Mercy Asia Pacific gathering and our Mercy Global Presence at the UNO. We desire to be a Mercy voice of, and for, the Asia Pacific region.