

Message from the General Secretary

During this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we are invited to reflect on the pericope of Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman in Gospel of John. This gospel seems ideally suited for this prayer. As I prepared a reflection on it for the Roseville-Lindfield –Killara Interchurch Fellowship I considered the interaction of Jesus with the woman. As with other gospel passages that we have read during this season of Easter, relationships presented as central. Relationships don't remain static – but lead to witness. 'I want to tell you about this wonderful experience'. One can almost hear the woman tell her friends!

The life-changing conversation that brought a village to Jesus and led him to stay with strangers for three days came about, it would seem by chance. Jesus decided to return to Galilee; he happened to sit at the well; the woman happened to come to draw water... However this was just not a matter of accident or coincidence. Risk-taking was central to this encounter. Jesus broke with tradition in speaking to a woman – and a Samaritan woman at that. The woman also took risks in responding to a stranger, a Jewish man.

So many of our ecumenical relations and activities have developed and will continue to develop through unplanned circumstances. As in the gospel incident, we may be called to take risks – but how fruitful they can be!

Ethiopian Orthodox Church mourns the deaths of 40 Christians

Following the news of the death of 40 Ethiopian Christians at the hands of Daesh, Bishop Daniel from the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Sydney led a prayer vigil for the Ethiopian Community.

I found this to be a particularly moving occasion as the community were graciously hosted by Bishop Daniel who spoke to them, leading them, as if he had gathered his own people.

Members of the Ethiopian community spoke to me of the desperate situation that their people are experiencing in Ethiopia. Generally, their situation is not noted in the media. Their suffering goes unnoticed.

Australian Church Women

The Annual Service of Dedication of Australian Church Women took place on Monday, 18 May. This was my introduction to Australian Church Women. During the gathering, Major Lillian Hodges, the co-ordinator of the Fellowship of the Least Coin, spoke of a project that ACW is supporting: Mum's Cottage. Here, mothers support mothers. Workshops are provided to meet a range of needs. From the basic group outshoots have grown: a mother of a child with a disability commenced a group for women in similar situations; when a single Dad came along, he decided to commence a Men's Group for single Dads. This was a heartening account of people responding to the needs that they met.

Armenian Apostolic Church remembers the Armenian Genocide



On Saturday 2nd May, the Armenian Apostolic Church celebrated the Divine Liturgy at St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney to honour the memory of the 1.5 million martyrs of the Armenian Genocide. Joining the members of the Armenian Church were Bishop Irinej of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Bishop Daniel of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Monsignor Basil (Armenian Catholic) and Graham Durston representing the Salvation Army.. I was privileged to join with them also.

Act for Peace – Ration Challenge – Karen's story

In December 2013 and March 2015 I travelled to Mae La refugee camp on the border of Burma and Thailand as part of my work for Act for Peace, the international aid agency of the National Council of Churches in Australia. The people of Burma have lived through the longest running conflict in the world. Hundreds of thousands have fled their homes for neighbouring Thailand and now live in refugee camps, like the one I travelled to.

Whilst I was there I met Than.

Than was just a boy when he saw his village being burnt to the ground by the Burmese army. He walked day and night with his family, with no food or water, finally finding safety here, in Mae La refugee camp. I remember so clearly Than talking about the safety he had found in Thailand yet the desire to go back home, "Life in Mae La camp is better than in Burma. Because I grow vegetables I can support my family." Like many refugees Than has been living in Mae La refugee camp for more than 21 years and he desperately hopes that one day, it will be safe enough to return to Burma. Life for Than and the many others like him is tough. Confined to the camps and without an official way to earn a living, he relies on food rations to survive.



When I first saw the rations Than and his family had to survive on I was in shock. He and his family have to survive on just a small amount of rice, flour, salt, fish paste, split peas and oil. Their rations for the month fit in one small corner of the kitchen. But the thing that got me emotional is that funding for even this small amount of rations are running low and the rations may have to be cut yet again.

Seeing these rations, it made me think that in Australia we live in one of the richest countries in the world, and yet people just don't seem to care about the refugees in places like this, who have nothing.

How can it be right to turn our backs on people in their time of need?

Together I believe that we can inspire people in Australia to be more compassionate, and make a real difference to the lives of refugees like Than, living here in Mae La camp.

On returning to Australia my colleagues and I developed the Act for Peace Ration Challenge. This June during refugee week I am taking the second ever Act for Peace Ration Challenge - and we need as many people as possible to join us. I will be eating the same rations as Than for one week, sharing my experience with my friends and family, and asking them to sponsor me.

Together I believe we will change attitudes in Australia towards refugees – starting with our own. And the money we raise will provide rations, seeds, tools and training to help ensure people like Than have enough to eat – now and in the future.

Go to actforpeace.org.au/rationchallenge and register to take the challenge today.

OUR ACTIVITIES

Refugee Week – Refugee Sunday 21 June 2015

All member churches of the NCCA are invited – even urged – to hold a day of prayer and fasting on Refugee Sunday 21 June (or an alternate day). Prayer resources are available on the NCCA website. Uniting Justice has prepared **JUSTICE FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS Resources for Worship**. Check out the website for more resources

<http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/refugees-and- asylum-seekers/information-and-action-resources/item/1007-refugee-week-2015>

Eco Mission Project

The Galilee Basin in central Queensland is the site of proposed new coal mining projects. According to various websites, these mines are expected to have lives of 45 – 60 years. Statistics can be found relating to the mass of coal that will be extracted, the number of jobs that will be created, the value for the Australian economy. However there is no way that the impact on the Aboriginal community, the Great Barrier Reef, and the world's climate can be measured.

See <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2015/may/15/carbon-bomb-australia-the-new-coal-frontier?CMP=ema-60>

OUR CHURCHES

Uniting Church in Australia

Hearts on Fire is the theme of the 14th Triennial Assembly of the Uniting Church to be held 12-18 July in Perth. At the beginning of this Assembly Reverend Prof Andrew Dutney's term as President will come to an end. The President-elect, Mr Stuart McMillan will be installed as President. Let us join them in prayer as they prepare for this event at which over 250 representative of synods and presbyteries will discern and make decisions affecting the corporate life of the Uniting Church in Australia.

Assyrian Church of the East

In the coming weeks, Archbishop Mar Meelis Zai will prepare for the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Assyrian Church of the East at which they will elect the Catholicos Patriarch. As well as praying for the gift of the Holy Spirit on the bishops gathered in Holy Synod, we recognize the continuing situation of the 230 Christians in the Middle East who are held captive by Daesh.

OUR PEOPLE - Delphine

How every bit of help counts – Meeting South Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia

A few months ago in April, I was lucky enough to go to Ethiopia, home to some of the world's most resilient people. After suffering a terrible famine in 1985, Ethiopia is now hosting the largest refugee population in Africa with over 700,000 refugees. I was blessed to be able to travel there with Sharon Edington, Act for Peace's International Programs Coordinator responsible for our Africa programs. Whilst in Ethiopia, we met a diverse range of South Sudanese refugees, most of whom had fled their country to escape the conflict that broke out in December 2013.

To give you an insight into my story and experience let me introduce myself. My name is Delphine and I work at Act for Peace where I look after the Christmas Bowl appeal. While I consider myself well-travelled, having experienced being without wifi and electricity and in remote places on many of my travels, I have to admit that this trip to Ethiopia has changed how I consider the world.

I believe this is because, for the first time in my life, I was finally able to put a face to the world's 50 million refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced people. And for me these people were Nhial, Chuol, Goin, Banchiewa, Sabur, Kama, Nyapuot, Wending, Kerieme or Okot. They each fled their country for many reasons; to survive, to keep their family safe and stay close to them, to find their parents and to continue their education.

My journey started in Akula, a small community in the Gambella region, not too far from the border of South Sudan. 1,600 South Sudanese refugees have been welcomed into the local host community in Akula. The conditions in Akula are basic but they were finally safe after a long, difficult and exhausting trip. At least that's what they thought. Apart from makeshift huts for shelter, there is no construction and no infrastructure. The community only has access to 2 water pumps and food is delivered by the World Food Program every month.



Akula community. There are 1,631 South Sudanese refugees living with 500 host individuals.

Before external support came to the community from our local partner the Ethiopian Orthodox Church Development and Inter-Church Aid Commission (EOC-DICAC) Akula struggled with even the basics such as access to clean water. The week before we arrived, jerrycans, buckets and soap had been delivered to Akula- before this they had nothing to fetch or store water with and no access to hygiene tools. The situation was extremely bad, including the fact that because there is no toilet and no functioning latrines, people had no choice but to openly defecate.

All the conditions combined had created a health crisis. An outbreak of Hepatitis E. broke out in January and many people have already died from the disease. I was both amazed and angry; amazed to see the strength and resilience of the people of Akula, standing together to face Hepatitis E, as well as angry that a community that had gone through so much had to tackle yet another threat to their safety and dignity.



The solution exists and it is simple. By building latrines, providing soap and hygiene training sessions, we can turn the tables and give people clean water and sanitation. By doing this, we're giving them a chance at good health and the means to start rebuilding their lives.

My next stop during my unforgettable journey brought me to Pugnido where EOC-DICAC runs a secondary school program. Pugnido is one of the oldest refugee camps and home to 54,000 refugees. Currently there are 756 students attending the Secondary School.

During the morning, normal classes are held for local students whereas the afternoons are dedicated for the

new arrivals- refugees who just crossed the border and want to go back to school after losing their education fleeing conflict. I was expecting to see teenagers of 14-15 years old in the classes, but instead I met young men of 19 -30 years old who had lost years of their lives just trying to stay alive and escape the violence that had covered their home country. They had seen and experienced some of the worst that the world can offer. But the thing that moved me was that what I saw in that classroom was not fear or pain from past experiences but strength on their faces. Their eyes held in them their stories and emotions and a deep desire to achieve their goals and build a future. For them this goal was as simple as going back to school so they could build a life for themselves. I saw courage: Kereme (15 years old) and Okot (19 years old) have lost their parents in the conflict. It took them 3 days to walk to reach the border. "School is good because when I grow up, I can do something for South Sudan ", Okot said.



Brothers Okot and Kerieme attending the afternoon class at Pugnido Secondary School.

It continued to amaze me how resilient refugees are.

Each of us work for Act for Peace, support Act for Peace or are part of the NCCA for different reasons. Many of us chose to work in the not-for-profit sector because we want to try and do something to make the world a better place. For me, meeting with these people reminded me that we all belong to one large human family and that beyond our primary needs for shelter, food and water, we are all sharing the same need for learning and bonding.

OUR PARTNERS



Anti-Poverty Week aims to strengthen public understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty and hardship – both around the world and in Australia and to encourage research, discussion and action by individuals and communities to address the problems.

Available on the anti-poverty week website <http://www.antipovertyweek.org.au/> are ideas for activities, resources for publication, guidelines. This week reminds us that poverty does not distinguish – it can affect our family, neighbours, friends, associates. Let's see what we can do to make a difference!

WEST PAPUA

The World Council of Churches has drawn our attention to the continuing situation of the people of West Papua in a statement issued on 1 May.

<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/churches-in-tanah-papua-seek-justice-peace-and-stability>

Earlier this year members of the Religious Society of Friends led a Peace Pilgrimage to West Papua. As a result of this pilgrimage, the Quakers recommend that the NCCA continue to strengthen links between churches in Australia and churches within West Papua.