

GIVING AND RECEIVING

Brother Gregory is at present head of RE at St Anselm's School, Basildon, Essex. He has been engaged for several years in facilitating opportunities for young people to work in the developing world from his own school. In this article he describes why this particular scheme is somewhat different from other similar ventures, and through the young men and women who have already participated sets out some of the teething problems and the rewards such a venture can give.

Community service at home

It is my experience that all young people have a latent generosity. This is easy to observe in the lower age groups of a secondary school when you have a surfeit of willing volunteers for almost anything you care to propose.

In the upper part of the school the response is more reflective and selective; just as these young people are learning their identity as adults and are tentative about career, relationships, beliefs, so too the same searching occurs in the areas in which they give of themselves.

At St Anselm's, the response of the staff has been to offer variety and opportunity. Sixth Form RE, for example, uses most of the time allocated to it in offering a number of different forms of community work.

After 11 years learning about Christian principles, these young men and women are time-tabled to engage in some form of Christian practice. This has resulted in the development of their own maturity, has been of benefit to the local community and helped them reflect further on their own commitment and beliefs.

The developing world

An extension of this "variety and opportunity" has been to offer those who wish the chance to work in the developing world. For the last three years several sixth-formers have deferred university entrance and have committed themselves for a year in either Jamaica or Thailand. Soon it is hoped to send our first young people to Africa.

But to what purpose? Is it just a bright little

adventure? Or is there a deeper significance or motivation? It was here that we learnt our first lesson in setting the scheme up.

From the point of view of the school the starting was that first hand experience of the developing world was infinitely more valuable than reading about it in books or watching TV documentaries; that upon their return these young people would have gained something for life and would influence their families, their colleagues at work, their fellow parishioners. In short, the young Christians emerging from such an experience would be aware of and wish to be part of a "global Church". This may, in time, be achieved.

In fact there were other unplanned spin-offs. The young people going out provided a quite outstanding witness for their families, their parish and their school. At least two kept up a regular "newsletter" correspondence with their parish; also, half of those who have returned to this country have already made arrangements for further work in the developing world.

Developing the helpers

This was not necessarily the motivation or the altruism of the young people who volunteered for this work before departure. In fact, the motivations as to "why" they wished to work in the developing world varied, and in at least one case was not clear even before departure. The problem of "programming" these young men and women adequately for their specific project also proved elusive. Consequently, the difficulties encountered varied from person to person.

CARL: "For me the isolation of the school I was working at and the lack of facilities to recreate in a fashion previously enjoyed by myself. Also, trivial though it seems, I wish to God someone had told me to bring boots, they were indispensable at the school.

CLAIRE: "The most difficult emotion to deal with, and the most frequent, was that of insecurity. It was frightening to think of what lay ahead: trying to "fit in", unsure of how much you had changed, whether people would accept this "new being", whether you would still be able to relate to others after so much isolation.

But now having returned, what do they think they gained from the experience?

PAUL: "My imagery of the Third World and its problems was very simplistic and black and white before I left the UK. Now I am more aware of its complexity and subtlety; most important of all, I can perceive it in human terms. Also, I found that my efforts in teaching English soon became outweighed by the love I received from pupils and friends.

CARL: "My homesickness developed into a deeper and objective appreciation and care for people that I had somewhat taken for granted in the past. Before Jamaica, I would say that I was

actually aware of the Third World and various countries (including my own) making efforts to help in small ways... But, to be honest, I always regarded these actions as good extras that First World societies performed "on top of all OUR problems". That has changed. Now, I know (not believe) that it is our duty to try to help the Third World, and we don't necessarily deserve a pat on the back, or recognition, when we do something.

Resources

An important question, frequently asked, is are these young people mature enough and do they have enough qualifications to be of any significant help in the developing world?

It is clear that an eighteen-year-old adult is going to be less mature than one, say, in his twenties; none have any degree qualifications, and their suitability for the work would depend on what their aptitudes were and the type of work being offered. But the primary purpose of the project is not to send a much needed helper into the Third World — though there must be worthwhile work for them to do — but to learn and understand and grow.

Here tribute must be paid to those people who, knowing what the purpose of the project was, still accepted these young people into their communities; in particular the Sisters of Mercy in Jamaica and the De La Salle Brothers in Thailand and their associates who shepherded them through their difficulties — and there were genuine difficulties, of culture, of homesickness, of isolation.

The romanticism of work in the developing world quickly wore off. The support and help of those receiving them was incalculable.

Special contribution

For this type of project fills a vacuum. The aid agencies and voluntary organisations such as VSO or VMM do largely require qualified young people and rarely below the age of 21. This makes sense when considered from the point of view that urgent help is needed in the developing world in nursing, education and agriculture, etc.

However, many generous young people lose out because while they are able to make that offering of themselves at 18, they may never be qualified enough or may have contracted other commitments by the time they are old enough to be accepted.

Also, the primary purpose is different — it is still basically about Christian education, of helping to develop a shift in awareness of our interdependence in the world so that most of the world will have a chance to truly develop.

In practice

How did they go about the project? The most urgent problem was raising the fare. The agreement is that the young volunteers would be given free board and lodging but would have to find their own way out there.

Early in the final school year a scheme is planned with each volunteer, for different fund raising ideas. These are many and varied: sponsored schemes, parish involvement, direct requests to local businesses, support from parish priests, weekend jobs and promotions such as local radio. These schemes are then time-tabled so as not to clash with each other or with their impending examinations.

In Jamaica, the volunteers worked at St Don Bosco School at Hatfield, near Mandeville. It is an establishment run by the Sisters of Mercy with the cooperation of some De La Salle Brothers.

It is run on the lines of a Boys' Town and contains youngsters from the ages of six to 18 years who have been put in care by the authorities or abandoned, or have been in trouble with the police.

The plan is to develop their skills in agriculture and to give them a basic education, thus leaving the establishment with the chance of a job.

The volunteers (five in the last three years), worked in the classroom and on the farm.

CLAIRE: "I shall always remember the chicken kill. Putting your hand up the backsides of eight-hundred chickens, the plastic dustbin full of innards and the smell..."

In Thailand the activities were more varied, working in a secondary school in Nakon Sawan; teaching English to some of the children of the Karen hill tribesmen and working in an orphanage. Here the introduction into Thai society was preceded by developing at least a working knowledge of the language. Staying with a Buddhist family who knew no English was the speediest inculturation for Paul.

From my own school there have been a couple of volunteers each year, with a number of applications coming from elsewhere. For anyone who has pupils thinking of doing the same thing, I let Paul have the last word:

...For those going on to higher education, the experience is simply brilliant and has given insight and impetus to my studies. Good luck to all those who have the privilege to go on future projects.

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