

# 'Shure what good can they do?'

## Immersion programmes from Irish Schools in the developing world

There is a stereotype of pampered private school students travelling to Kenya, India, Zambia or Brazil, pulling up on air-conditioned coaches, spending a week or two laying bricks for a new community centre, taking 'selfies' and ultimately coming home feeling as though they have changed the world.

Regardless of how accurate that image may or may not be – or indeed what doubts nay-sayers or missionary moguls might express – it is worthwhile taking a deeper look at the trend of school immersion programmes and perhaps tapping into the energy that lies beneath, for the benefit of our ageing Church.

Hundreds of secondary school students participate in overseas volunteering programmes every summer. Many of these experiences are facilitated by Catholic secondary schools – the Christian Brothers, the Ursuline Sisters and the Spiritans, to name but a few. All congregations with a noble tradition of mission and service to the poor across the world.

However, there are a few key elements to a meaningful immersion programme. Firstly, the wishes and needs of vulnerable people should be placed at its heart. Secondly, it is essential that those travelling are properly briefed on security, well-being and the reality of the challenges that they will face. Thirdly, the overall approach that the school or congregation takes will set the difference in tone between an expedition in 'poverty tourism' or a journey of solidarity and learning with the marginalised in our world, which continues long after the return home.

Finally, there is one question that begs to be asked by group facilitators before, during and after the experience: *what is this saying to us about our faith?*

For those who travel, there is an opportunity to encounter a very different Catholic Church. It is the Church in action with the poorest people in the world, which some would feel, is our Church at her strongest. Liturgies are lively, parishes are a hub and there is a visible fervency about how belief in the almighty

is expressed amid the chaos and adversity of the global south.

For a young person to meet an Irish man or woman – often the age of their granny or grandad – who has lived in difficult conditions for longer than their own lifetime, advocating for rights and justice, it cannot but give pause for reflection. If we are serious about hoping and praying for vocations to religious life or increased lay engagement in the Church, there is perhaps value in introducing generation Y, who have generally witnessed few lives of service, to the missionary heroes of our time – before they are all gone.

Immersion programmes should not always be about trying to 'do something' or make an impact. Spending time, playing games, breaking bread, listening to stories, witnessing and encountering the poor are at its core. In Luke 14, where Jesus goes to share a meal with one of the leading Pharisees, he challenges his privileged host to invite 'the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind' as dinner party guests and do nothing more.

The Vincentians run an immersion programme for 5th years from their two Dublin schools to Ethiopia. The students work in a community where the Vincentians have established a centre for the deaf. This year a student travelled whose parents are from the Irish deaf community. Having grown up using sign language at home, he was able to communicate easily and form meaningful bonds with the service users. They were truly moved when he told them his family story. Up until then, such was the stigma they felt, they had not believed that deaf people could go on to live fulfilled lives, marry and have children! This encounter was one of real hope for these young Ethiopians and perhaps an 'ah-ha moment' for this young man from Dublin.



Photos: Mary Anne Stokes



Above: Mary Anne Stokes with Children at the Vincentian Community Centre in Mekele, northern Ethiopia.

Left: Tadgh Hanlon and Colm Peelo from Castleknock College with children during the Vincentian Summer Programme in Ambo Ethiopia

There is no measure of the depth or breadth of these encounters on local people or on the young man or woman present in that moment. Immersion programmes are perhaps a window into the lives of some fortunate young Irish people through which the Holy Spirit is flowing. We should be careful not to close this window or stifle the flow. We should pull back the curtains and throw it wide in whichever ways we can. In years to come, our Church and community may well be eating the fruits of the plants whose seeds we help sow today.

Mary Anne Stokes, Projects Coordinator  
Vincentian Lay Missionaries (VLM)  
St Peter's Parish Office, New Cabra Road,  
Phibsborough, Dublin D07 FW29