



MercyWorks

SISTERS OF MERCY
IN AUSTRALIA & PAPUA NEW GUINEA

MERCY IN ACTION

NO BOOTS AND PLENTY OF WALKING

I have come from the other side of the world to be with you today. I am very pleased to be here and to share with you some of the happenings in our part of the world where we witness Mercy in Action just as you do in your part of the world.

We are privileged to be here in the very place where Catherine McAuley began what has become our particular expression of mercy. We know that Catherine lived for a short 10 years after she began the Sisters of Mercy with her young companions. It was not long after her death in 1841 that the Sisters of Mercy embarked upon on the long journey to Australia.

Ursula Frayne and her companions (all Catherine's contemporaries) took the 3 months boat journey in 1846 and landed on the West Coast of Australia. And from there the Sisters of Mercy spread across our vast land and to Papua New Guinea. Today there are thousands of Mercy people, including Sisters doing the works of Mercy, as inspired by Catherine.

The white population had only settled in Australia in 1788, so the living conditions in 1846 were, to say the least, pretty basic. That is not the case in Australia today. Of the 187 countries on the United Nations Human Development Index Australia rates number 2.

Papua New Guinea and Timor Leste (2 countries where Mercy Works has projects) are countries very close to Australia, just to our north. The plane flight from Darwin to Dili (Timor Leste) takes less than an hour and the flight from Cairns to Port Moresby (PNG) is a little over an hour. The living conditions of both of these countries, so close to Australia, are so different.

Papua New Guinea rates 157 on the UN Index and Timor Leste rates 128. Of the 7 million people who live in PNG 30% live in poverty (less than US\$1.25 a day), life expectancy is 62 years and the mortality rate of children under 5 is 57 per 1,000.

Timor Leste has a population of 1.2million. It is one of the newest countries in the world, having gained independence from Indonesia in 1999. Independence came after a bloody struggle and many of the adults were killed. As a result 45% of Timorese are under 14 and 50% of the population live below the poverty line. In Australia, too, not everyone enjoys a high standard of living. Amongst those are our original inhabitants of Australia, the aborigines and our latest arrivals, refugees and asylum seekers.

The aborigines amount to about 2.5% of the population of Australia and their communities continue to face significant disadvantages in health, education, housing and employment. Their life expectancy is up to 20 years less than other Australians, their average income is 62% of the white the population, their under 5 mortality rate is twice that of white Australians and only 39% complete school to the senior level.

All over the world there is a migration crisis. Conflict in many lands, particularly the Middle East and Africa is causing massive displacement across the world. Even though Australia is far away from these conflicts, people want to come to our land because they have heard that Australia is peaceful and the people are friendly. And it is. So, they take perilous journeys across land, in planes and in some cases in shaky boats paying people smugglers thousands of dollars just to reach safety. Unfortunately the Australian Government takes a tough stand towards these people, refusing in lots of cases to give them permanent residency and sometimes threatening to send them back to their country of origin. When they arrive in Australia they face years of detention as their status is assessed and when released into the community are denied work rights and access to education. Of the millions of refugees worldwide Australia settled a mere 20,000 in 2014 out of 50,000 applicants.

In the year 2000 the United Nations set the Millennium Development Goals. In setting these goals they sent out a challenge to the nations of the world to work together to overcome hunger and disease. We are all familiar with these goals:

- Eradicate extreme poverty
- Achieve universal primary education
- Promote gender equality and empower women
- Reduce child mortality
- Improve maternal health
- Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- Ensure environmental sustainability
- Encourage global partnership and development.

The United Nations gave themselves 15 years to achieve these goals. We are now in the 15th year. The UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon said recently 'the MDG's have been the greatest anti-poverty push in history. New partnerships have been established. And now, we must finish the job.' Mercy Works is one of the partners to which Ban Ki-Moon is referring, as are many other government and non government organizations across the world.

We know that Catherine McAuley was a woman of action. One saying of hers often quoted is '*The poor need help today, not next week*'. We know too, of her distress when she had to turn away a destitute young woman who had knocked on the door here at Baggot Street and Catherine could not help her. It is said that incident stayed in Catherine's mind and heart for a long time.

In 2006 the Sisters of Mercy across Australia and Papua New set up Mercy Works. Mercy Works is a development organization. There are many development organizations in the world. You know of some of them (OXFAM, Save the Children) All development organizations aim to assist people in such a way that their lives become self sustaining. These organizations engage with local people in a process which aims to improve the well-being of the whole population and of all individuals on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation and in the fair distribution of the benefits that result from this process.

Mercy Works has local co-ordinators in Australia, Papua New Guinea and Timor Leste who sit down with the people, discuss their needs and then help them to determine how they can go about meeting these needs. We don't tell the people what to do. They work out what they need, put their requests to us and, if possible we help them to have their needs satisfied.

I'm now going to take you on a quick trip around the places where we do our work. The first is Papua New Guinea. Papua New Guinea is a naturally beautiful country. Close to the equator, with rich volcanic soil in its highlands and lots of natural resources such as gold, copper, gas and oil it has the potential to be a thriving and prosperous economy. That won't happen though, while corruption thrives throughout its systems. Much of the aid which comes to the country finds its way into the pockets of the politicians and local business owners and little reaches the people who really need it. Consequently, roads are poorly constructed and maintained, water systems are basic and the power systems frequently beak down. Access to health care and education, basic commodities, varies enormously, depending on where you are and who you are.

Mercy Works is one of the few development organizations in Papua New Guinea which people value. Why? Because Mercy Works delivers the goods. Because we are a small organization we are close to the people, know their needs and deliver our services in an honest and fair way.

In the highland towns of Goroka and Mt Hagen we have centres to which people come for information, referrals and emotional support. Some walk for hours along bush roads carrying their goods in the Bilums to get to us. At our centres we run awareness and skills training courses. The people learn to sew, cook, make soap and more productive ways of growing their crops. Then they bring their goods to the Mercy Markets where they sell them. The Mercy Markets are popular because the customers know that the produce is good and the price is fair. Another skill taught at Mercy Works is that of budgeting. So, our clients learn how to save their money and some have even been able to open up a bank account.

Many of the highland people live in remote villages outside Goroka and Mt Hagen. Because of the rugged terrain these villages are hard to access. Even though most of these villages have no electricity these people have battery operated radios. Mercy Works conducts radio programs 3 times a week to inform those people

about issues of importance. Issues such as human rights and responsibilities are covered and the villagers are encouraged to come into the Mercy Works centre to learn more and access the skills training programs.

Violence in Papua New Guinea is a serious problem. The structure of the society, with its many disadvantages, does nothing to assist the people to overcome it. Mercy Works takes advantage of the United Nations International awareness days to inform the people of the issues and how to access resources to assist them.

Unfortunately, some of the citizens find themselves in jail because of violence. Often times, they have killed their wife or husband. Mercy Works visits the men's women's and juveniles' prisons. We teach the prisoners anger management as well as the skills taught at our centres. The prisoners' handiwork is then sold at the Mercy Markets. When these people come out of prison they already have a start as they begin to rebuild their lives.

Some families live on the streets of the towns. The young boys get small amounts of money by carrying loads in the markets. Often they carry loads twice their weight. We work with these taxi boys to help them develop their self esteem. An Australian football team, the Sydney Swans has given us equipment, including proper football boots and our Mercy Works personnel teach them footballs skills and they enter the local competition as the Mercy Swans. This activity gives them a relief from their otherwise difficult lives.

Kiunga, in the Western Province, is a rapidly expanding town as gas and oil companies mine the natural resources. The mighty Fly River wends its way through the villages along the way. Reducing infant mortality has been the Mercy Works target in this area. Our Mercy Works people access the villages by going up the Fly in a boat then walking through the jungle tracks until they arrive at their destination. The trip can take most of the day, so they make sure they leave early in the morning in order to arrive before nightfall. They train local birth attendants and provide them with a simple birthing kit. Over the 6 years these scheme has been operating infant mortality has been dramatically reduced. Now the program has been extended to a general village health program. This program is geared towards providing clean water and toileting systems and educating the villagers on healthy cooking techniques.

The Fly River is subject to serious flooding. Mercy Works is assisting the people switch from growing more traditional vegetables to rice. This change has enabled them to have more food security as rice is a quicker crop to grow than the traditional potatoes.

The Catholic Diocese of Daru Kiunga is anxious to become self sustaining. 6 years ago the Bishop approached Mercy Works to go into partnership to plant an eaglewood plantation. The trees have been planted and are being cared for. In 5 years time the resin will be harvested. The Diocese will begin a perfume industry as they sell candles and incense harvested from the trees. I visited Kiunga in May and went out to the plantation. For us it was a 30 minute drive in our ute. Along the way we passed dozens of people as they walked their way slowly home from market carrying their heavy loads in the heat of the midday sun.

The Papua New Guinea Government has made education free. That's great. However, the Government is slow to provide the resources for this to happen. Mercy Works has been assisting the Mercy Secondary School in Wewak. We have built a health clinic, a new drainage system and are currently building dormitories.

Because most of the population of Papua New Guinea live in remote areas, most high schools are boarding schools. Once the students arrive at school at the beginning of the year they stay for the full year as it takes too long to get to and from home. Roads can sometimes be impassable and plane flights can be cancelled at the drop of a hat. Mercy Works is currently engaged in an extensive program of building dormitories and ablution blocks in 4 large high schools across the country.

Catherine McAuley believed in the value of education. So does Mercy Works. At assist access to higher education we provide tertiary scholarships to applicants. As well as that we are assisting the Mt Hagen teachers college to support their graduates as they go back to their own remote local areas to begin passing on their skills to their own villagers.

I go to visit the Mercy Works projects in Papua New Guinea on a regular basis. I always come back energized. I am energized by the dedication of our people on the ground. I am energized by the courage of the people in our programs as they seek to improve the quality of their lives with our help. They have so much disadvantage to overcome. I live a blessed life. I grew up in a stable family in a beautiful part of the world. I received a good education and I am living a fruitful life. I have plenty of reason for hope. The people I meet in my role at Mercy Works are also people of hope. In spite of their living conditions their faith and their desire for good gives them plenty of reason for hope. I learn so much about life from them.

When I am at home I begin to think of the disadvantaged people in Australia. Currently we are in partnership with 2 aboriginal groups which run preschools. They are both in remote areas at Alice Springs and on Bathurst Island. These little children live in very deprived circumstances. In many cases their parents spend a fair amount of their day drinking alcohol. Subsequently they neglect their children and, even worse, abuse them. The children come to school to be safe. We are helping the staff to provide nutritional meals and to engage them in activities to build their resilience and self esteem. The schools are also encouraging the mothers to come to schools to help in cooking the meals and reading to their children. These activities are designed to break the cycle of abuse.

Many of the refugees in Australia live in the capital cities. Once the children start in the schools our Mercy Connect programs assists them in their social adjustment to life in Australia. These refugee children have been exposed to danger and severe insecurity as they have escaped their homelands to seek safety. Some of them, particularly the Sudanese have walked for weeks from one country to another. I have listened to stories of children walking from their home across the Sudan to Kenya. Some have seen family members drown crossing rivers. All have had to scrounge for food and water.

Once in school in Australia the children often feel isolated and anxious as they are expected to adjust quickly to the rules, procedures and academic learning in a foreign language. Our Mercy Connect volunteers sit with these children and support them in nurturing their self esteem as they make their way to becoming confident learners in the Australian context.

Hundreds of asylum seekers are in Australia hoping to be granted permanent visas with consequent work rights. While they wait in limbo they suffer much anxiety and often lose hope. Our Mercy House of Welcome in Adelaide is one place where these people can feel welcome and have some sense of hope. They come every day to the House to learn English, to get legal advice and assistance with food and clothing.

Then there is Timor Leste. Like PNG Timor Leste is naturally beautiful country with many natural resources. Close to the equator it too, has lots of potential. Yet, it faces many challenges as it reestablishes itself after the devastation of war and violence. Most of the infrastructure of the country – electricity, water supply, roads - was destroyed in the struggle for independence. Travel is difficult and most of the population live in remote villages in the mountains. Our main work in Timor Leste is to help the people build up their education system. Village after village approach us to build a preschool and to train some local women to teach the children. This year we are up to the construction of our fifth one. The preschools are small as the roads from village to village are rough and become impassable during the wet season. Even so, the little children walk long distances to get to our centres.

As malnutrition is a serious problem in Timor Leste, we make sure the children receive a nutritional meal each day. As the numbers of preschools grow, we are developing a mentoring and support system for the teachers. As many of the schools were destroyed during the war we are pulling our weight in helping to rebuild them. There is still a long way to go.

Pope Francis in his latest encyclical *Laudato Si* has said *'We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family. There are no frontiers or barriers, political or social, behind which to hide, still less is there room for the globalization of indifference.'*

Mercy Works has been playing its part in helping to reach the millennium goals. A good start has been made but there is still much to do. Mercy Works will continue to work with local partners to strive for a better world. It starts with us, and will continue until it ends.

Ailsa Mackinnon RSM
Mercy Works Executive Director
July 14 2015