

Supporting School Communities

Catholic Teachers' Sodality Conference 2008

Archdiocese of Honiara and Diocese of Sale Partnership

Don Bosco Technical School, Honiara, 20-23 September

By Caroline Smith, Australian Catholic University

It is September and here we are again in the beautiful Solomon Islands; the third time for me. Our group is from the Catholic Education Office, Diocese of Sale in Victoria, Australia. Andrea Berryman and Liz Simon teach at Trinity Primary School, Narre Warren and it's the second visit for Andrea. Ian Butler, Jan Rankins and Malcolm Joseph are from St Francis Xavier College, Beaconsfield. Jan teaches English, Ian RE, Maths and Science, and Malcolm, is the Deputy Principal.



We are here as part of the partnership established between the Archdiocese of Honiara and the Diocese of Sale. This is the fifth year of the partnership initiated by Jim Quillinan from Sale CEO in 2004 and supported by a five year commitment from the Diocese. From humble beginnings sparked by a conversation between Jim and Archbishop Adrian in Honiara,



followed in 2005 by a visit by Sale teachers, the partnership blossomed into the development of the teachers' conferences held in 2006, 2007 and 2008. The partnership has come far. Under the leadership of Cathy Mesaric from the Sale CEO, the first conference was held at St. Joseph's School Tenaru, and was mainly for primary teachers. It was also the birth of the Catholic Teachers' Sodality

chaired by Jackson Meke, Principal of Bishop Epalle School. This is a professional organisation formed by a group of teachers from the conference and has proved vital to the communication and building of the partnership and the beginnings of teacher professional learning.

In 2007 the conference was led by Sale's Dr. Chris Holt, and this time the venue was beautiful Visale. This conference was significant in the high level of collaboration between teachers from Sale and Solomons as we planned together and co-presented, marking a deepening of the partnership. Friendships strengthened and understandings began to grow. I personally have very fond memories of co-presenting concept mapping on the beach at Visale using natural materials and being amazed at the depth of discussion that took place. Something I think some of our Australian teachers could learn from! The conference by now had a participation certificate signed by a Ministry of Education official, Mr. Donation Hiruhiru, surely a clear recognition of its growing place in teacher professional learning in the Solomons.

This year we were based at Don Bosco Technical School in Honiara, and thanks go to Fr Ambrose Pereira sdb, for his generous hospitality. Around 100 teachers attended from many different schools from as far field as Malaita and Makira. The theme this year was "*Supporting School Communities*". By learning together, sharing experiences and exploring the complexities of student and teacher well-being, leadership and good classroom practice, we all believe that the whole community will benefit. The conference was designed to provide both a stronger secondary focus, as well as building on aspects of leadership and well-being that had begun at Visale. These workshops were particularly well attended, reflecting teachers' desire to learn more about aspects of education beyond the classroom. This year the certificates of participation were very kindly signed by Mr Aceri, Director of Secondary Education at MEHRD, who also gave the final address.

One very exciting development this year has been the provision of credit by Australian Catholic University. Suitably qualified participants who successfully complete three days of workshops and an assessment task set and assessed by an ACU staff member, are eligible to be granted credit towards either an undergraduate or postgraduate unit in education at ACU. Sessions explaining the assessment task were very well attended, demonstrating the high level of interest Solomon Island teachers have in professional learning and gaining formal qualifications. It remains to be seen whether this credit can be transferred to courses at SICHE.



Who would have thought that a chance conversation could have resulted, five years later, in a conference attended by 100 teachers, counting towards credit at a university and addressed by the Director of Secondary Education. This is the power of a committed partnership. But being the fifth year, the future of the partnership is not yet clear. We all hope and pray that it will continue, but this is still to be determined. Whatever happens, the firm bonds and friendships that have been formed will ensure that in some form or other, the partnership will stay alive.

The spiritual and religious dimensions were highlighted by the prayers at the beginning and end of each day. These not only provided a context for our work, but also enabled us to connect as a community. This culminated in a beautiful Mass during which everyone participated with enthusiasm, joy and reverence.

For us from Australia, the Solomon Islanders we have had the privilege to work with and get to know have given us the priceless gift of seeing how we are at once different and the same. Our cultural backgrounds may shape us in different ways, but our common humanity and vocation as teachers means we have riches to share, learn and bring to each other. This is the true meaning of partnership.