

# The journey is important

- Personal reflections of Irene Jap, Volunteer worker in the Solomon Islands

My journey in voluntary work continues. After being away for nearly 2 years, I thank God for the opportunity to return to my beloved Solomons for the third assignment. This time I came to do 2 jobs during the 12-week period in March to May 2008.

The first job was in the Diocese of Auki for 5 weeks. I was to up skill the finance manager who has been on the job for the last 2 decades. It was a short stay for the many things we did. I believe I came at God's perfect timing. A new finance staff joined the team 3 days prior to my arrival. Had the new staff not been recruited, we would have accomplished very little. The Bishop and his staff gave me a lot of support by being enthusiastic. I am grateful for that. I was also touched by their loving kindness and generosity. The work environment was pleasing with children chattering from the Kindergarten next to our office.



I stayed with DMI sisters in their Bethany convent. I was blessed with a view of sunset from my bedroom windows, and with birds twittering in the morning. The chapel in the house was where I could spend more time alone with the Lord. I enjoyed the company of an elderly sister in the house. Listening to her stories as she shared her spiritual journeys was a consolation to me. This was my first trip to Malaita. It was interesting to see many blondes with dark skin. Auki is a peaceful little town. Early in the morning I could walk alone safely to church about 1.5 km away. On Sundays, we could see people walking for a good 1 to 2 hours from their villages to celebrate our Eucharist. It was inspiring.

There were a few major events while I was there. One was the launching of the Langa-Langa Bible in a nearby village. It was to celebrate the achievement of 9-year of hard work in translating the New Testament into the 'Langus'. I did not imagine that it would take that long to do the job. The Easter celebrations were fantastic. From Holy Thursday, Good Friday passion drama followed by the Stations of the Cross from Auki town to the Cathedral, through to the Fun Run on Easter Monday were all special events to remember. The masses were truly celebrations. The dances were beautiful, and the children performances with their animal outfits were really cute. The feasts were superb, not to mention the delicious pasta personally cooked by the Bishop. Another highlight in Auki was the blessing of a new chapel. It was the first time in my life to participate in such an event. The chapel - 'Our lady of Fanualama' (Peace) was blessed on the weekend after Easter. The chapel is simple but beautiful. Many people came to the opening mass, and a huge pot-luck dinner followed. I am glad I came to see such beauty.

I thought I would spend one weekend in Auki as a hermit. One Saturday morning, I asked God to give me a nice surprise. Well, instead of being in solitude that day, I encountered a new aspect of the Solomon culture. I witnessed the local customs of paying shell money to the girl's family, and of her leaving home 'for good' to be with the boy. Although I invited myself to the party, I was treated as a privileged guest with a private translator. And later that afternoon, we received an invitation to a birthday party of one of our neighbors. It turned out to be a busy Saturday. I was very well fed, with 2 big feasts in a day. God is good and generous. I asked for one surprise, He gave me two!

Overall, Auki experience was very good. The only things that I did not appreciate were the sand flies of Buma. Although I was there for only an hour, I came back with a few bites, leaving big blisters on my arms. I think this was the only 'hardship' I experienced. After completing my job in Auki, the rest of my time in the Solomon Islands was spent working with the Bursar of the Dominican sisters. I assisted her with the finance administration and reporting. While most of my time was spent in Honiara, I also visited their communities in the Western province, for two weeks. This was an enjoyable second trip to the West. I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the lagoon. The seafood was fantastic.

From Gizo, we traveled with our little canoe to New Georgia, Shortland and Choiseul islands; to Loga, Vanga Point, Canaan, Noro, Nila and Moli. We traveled in the sea where just a year 52 people lost their lives in the Tsunami. At times, we traveled in the open sea with no sight of islands on the horizon. Travel was done in the early morning before sunrise, by mid day, and by night. While at sea, the climate changed often. One moment, it looked like a perfect day with deep-blue skies; the next moment, it rained heavily. The sea does look pretty when it rains. The thunders in the darkness of the night gave us light, and helped us with direction in the sea. It was good that we did not have rough seas. The trips were tiring and rather difficult for me, as I was not used to it. Nevertheless, I saw God's beauty. Sunrise and rainbows seen from our little canoe in the sea were majestic and romantic. I saw flying fishes, pairs of seagulls and a crocodile (from a distant). Dolphins gave her greetings too. It was a priceless adventure.

As we visited the communities in these isolated places, my thoughts went to the people who have served the Lord there, especially the foreign nationals. They chose to leave their comfort zones, to endure sufferings so they can be there with the people for an unlimited time. It must be God's grace that sustains them. I thank God for them. Our work was fruitful. I was proud of the sisters' efforts. I believe we would not have done it without God. I saw His hand in action. We did not have a good start, but the transformation was real. I came to offer my skills. I realized that I can not make everyone accept my offer. Some might have misunderstood me, and did not consider my presence to be good news.

One time I was angry when something did not happen according to what we have planned together. I have allowed myself to quickly pass judgment of others. Later I regretted my reaction. I learned that when things go wrong, I needed to look into myself to find the reasons and to listen to my negative emotions. I learned that I still have a lot to learn. While in Honiara, I followed the sisters to the party to celebrate the Archbishop's silver jubilee as a bishop. It was a splendid milestone. I am pleased that I went, although I thought I joined the wrong crowd, as I am not a 'Religious'. God has blessed us with such a fine leader for His church. The Archbishop's simplicity and humility continue to inspire me.

Throughout the 12 weeks, I hung around with nuns from 2 different religious orders. I was welcomed in 6 of their convents. I am grateful for their kind hospitality. Although our lifestyles are somewhat different, bottom line, we are all the same people with our strengths and weaknesses. Each of us does have our own unique ways of seeking and discovering God; and of expressing our love to Him. As a lay person, I treasure this experience of living in a convent. As time goes by, I have learned that the journey is more important than the destination. It is what I learn and experience along the way that is important. I believe failing to recognize the lessons is missing the point of the journey. With more assignments such as this in the pipeline, so does my journey of self-discovery continue.

I give thanks to God for His many blessings during my time in the Solomon Islands.