

MEDIA RELEASE

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For immediate release

Bishop of Phnom Penh stops by to thank East Lake Macquarie parish

St Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Belmont welcomed a very special guest last week as Bishop Olivier Schmitthaeusler, the Apostolic Vicar of Phnom Penh, dropped by during a fleeting Australian visit.

Bishop Olivier was the guest of honour at a luncheon hosted by Catholic Mission and the Jesus the Good Shepherd Parish, which incorporates Swansea, Belmont and Windale.

He shared with the group about an education, training and social enterprise project for disadvantaged people, which he has built from scratch on the outskirts of the Cambodian capital.

It includes an agricultural and technical high school, social enterprise training programs, and the St Paul Institute, which prepares young people for tertiary studies.

'In 2014, the Cambodian government got tough on cheating and bribery in the final high school exams,' he told the gathering. 'While nationally 70% of students failed, the St Paul Institute achieved a 100% pass rate.'

'We have plans to expand the entire program to ensure even more disadvantaged people have the opportunity to learn and apply a skill.'

Bishop Olivier shared about the holistic agriculture and social enterprise project (above) he is developing in Phnom Penh with the support of Catholic Mission.

In his presentation to over 50 guests on a sunny afternoon in Belmont, the French-born missionary spoke of his work to bring sustainable and effective education programs to his local area—work which was rewarded by Cambodia's King Sihamoni in 2012.

In a country where 98% of the population is Buddhist, Bishop Olivier firmly believes the re-emerging Catholic Church can lead ecumenical collaboration to rebuild an education system left shattered after the Khmer Rouge regime of the late-1970s.

Despite a hectic schedule allowing just three days in Sydney, Bishop Olivier was intent on visiting supporters from the parish who have contributed to his work, through Catholic Mission, for over two years.

'We decided to make a practical difference by encouraging each other to fundraise for projects that would make a difference here in our own community, in Aboriginal Australia, and abroad,' said Paul Coles, who helped form the parish's social justice group in 2005.

Bishop Olivier told the gathering, 'With your financial and prayerful support, our tiny church communities have found many practical and life-giving ways to reflect the merciful face of God to those in need in Cambodia. I am here to thank you for your generosity and love.'

For more information about Catholic Mission's work in Cambodia and overseas, visit catholicmission.org.au, or contact Maitland-Newcastle Diocesan Director Mark Toohey on 4979 1141.

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