

Australian Marist Solidarity

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MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate distribution

20 years on, transforming education in Timor-Leste

On August 30, Timor-Leste will celebrate the 20th Anniversary of the 1999 UN-managed referendum when the people voted overwhelmingly to separate from Indonesia. During the Indonesian reign as many as 200,000 perished resisting the Indonesian occupation and seizure or as a result of famine and disease. However, the transfer of power was accompanied by violence committed by anti-independence militants leaving hundreds of people killed.

When the Indonesians retreated from Timor-Leste in 1999, they enacted a 'scorched earth policy' which crippled the education sector as 80% of schools were destroyed completely and 90% of the remaining schools damaged. This has lingering implications for students and teachers of today as majority schools remain badly damaged and in a derelict state.

In 1999 Bishop Nascimento of Baucau issued an invitation to the Marist Brothers of the Melbourne Province of Australia to enter Timor-Leste and respond to the needs of education there.

In 2000, the first Marist Brothers arrived in Timor-Leste to help repair the education system that had been left in disarray. Bishop Nascimento initiated the plan for a diocesan teacher training college in Baucau, under the administration of the Marist Brothers, to serve for professional development of current untrained teachers in classrooms and to provide an undergraduate course for training new teachers accredited by the Australian Catholic University. The training college was named Instituto Catholico Para Formacao De Professores (ICFP) with the first students graduating in 2006.

Today, the college empowers its students to become leaders in the field of primary education and leaders within their own local community as well. Trained in critical thinking, pedagogy and child development, the students are readily offered employment upon graduation.

Working in the Spirit of St Marcellin Champagnat, the Marist Brothers and their Timorese colleagues have been working to transform Timor-Leste and bring education and hope to the youth of Timor-Leste.

Rebuilding has not been an easy task. Australian Marist Solidarity (AMS) with the support of their donors and partners have undertaken 92 projects since 2000 in Timor-Leste. These include a major schools' restoration programme in the Diocese of Baucau which has supported 14 schools to date. Also, development and learning centres, skills training (carpentry, agriculture, hospitality, sewing, mechanics and computing), programs for children with disabilities, youth and women's centres, boys' and girls' hostels and many more much need projects.

One of the many success stories is the Carpentry and Computer Centre (CTUF). This program provides computer and carpentry training for young people in the village of Uai-Lili. The area was previously known as a dangerous place to visit as it was home to destructive and aggressive young people who would throw rocks at passers-by and vehicles driving through the village.

Maway, director of CTUF, was previously a leader of a gang in the area until he decided to turn his life around in 2013. With the assistance of the Marist Brothers and Marist Solidarity, Maway secured an abandoned school building with approval from the local chief. In 2014 he established CTUF, with a staff of 3, and the computer program that has had 238 participants from 2014. Under Maway's leadership CTUF also runs a small carpentry training workshop which teaches DIY skills that students can use at home or for work.

"Because in my life in the past, I was a person who had a bad attitude and from the support I received I tried to create something new from my life, for the future," said Maway.

"My main aim for this centre is for the young people to move from not knowing to knowing. From not understanding to understanding. How can we learn together to help those who have no power to be empowered?"

AMS, with the Marist Brothers Communities and the Diocese of Baucau has certainly made a difference in the lives of youth in Timor-Leste however, there is still much more to do. 46% of the East Timorese population is between 0 and 14 years old with children constituting almost half of the population and are the first victims of the high rate of poverty of the country. Of this, only 14% of children aged 6 to 11 are not regularly enrolled in schools. There is also the lack of basic services such as clean water, sanitation, health services and nutrition.

20 years is not a long time to build an education system out of the ashes, however, with young Timorese people like Maway and the ICFP graduates, there is certainly much hope for the next 20 years.

Background:

Australian Marist Solidarity Limited (AMS) has evolved from a long heritage of aid and development activities conducted by the Marist Brothers Province of Australia. The Brothers have financially supported and managed overseas aid and development programs in the Solomon Islands since 1938, in Bougainville since 1941 and in other parts of Papua New Guinea since 1950.

Today, the Marist Brothers have a broad presence in Asia and the Pacific including Bangladesh, Bougainville, Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Fiji, India, Kiribati, New Caledonia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vanuatu. AMS currently supports fifteen of these countries in a range of ways.

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