



PARTNER CHURCHES BUILD CONNECTIONS IN NZ

Two recent programmes saw strands of faith extend between New Zealand, Vanuatu and Taiwan as part of the Church's ongoing commitment to building awareness and understanding with its partner churches in other countries.

The first involved 10 young people – five each from Taiwan and Vanuatu – who attended a youth exchange programme in July that ended with them joining the Presbyterian Youth Ministry (PYM) national youth leaders' conference, Connect, at Te Maungarongo – Ohope Marae.

The second initiative brought two Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu (PCV) chaplains – Carl Nial and Kevin Dalesa – to New Zealand in August to attend the annual conference of the New Zealand Association of Religious Education Teachers and School Chaplains, and the Presbyterian Church Schools' Conference.

Both exchanges fit well into the Presbyterian Church's overall mission programme, says Rev Phil King, PCANZ Global Mission Co-ordinator.

"It's important to build awareness and understanding of our partner churches' cultures and contexts and to help build their capacity through supporting the training and educational development of their leaders," he says.

Enriching for hosts and visitors

"As a host church, we are enriched through offering hospitality, cultural exposure to New Zealand, and providing training opportunities for our partners. For both parties at an institutional level, the relationship is strengthened and deepened. On a personal level, important friendships are formed, and individuals are encouraged in their faith and equipped with new tools to support them in their leadership and ministry."

The visit to New Zealand by PCV chaplains was a first. Phil says it came about through an invitation from church schools during the planning stages of the conference.

"They asked me if we would like to include any chaplains from church schools in Vanuatu," he explains. "This was a generous offer from which I could immediately see benefits, so I jumped at it. After contacting the PCV schools' office, we managed to facilitate the visits of Kevin and Carl to both the church schools conference and the Presbyterian Church Schools Conference which followed immediately afterwards."

Rev Reuben Hardie, St Kentigern's Boys' and Girls' schools chaplain and a Presbyterian minister, hosted the Vanuatu chaplains. He accommodated the visitors in his home for a week and provided transport.

A grateful Phil says: "His buy-in to the whole thing made it so much easier to manage. Reuben is actively involved in arranging school visits to Vanuatu, so he has a high level of engagement in the partnership."

Kevin is the chaplain at Seaside School in Port Vila. Speaking recently via Reuben he described the chaplains' conference as "very interesting".

"It was a first time for me to attend a conference like this one, and I thought it gave me a new start on enhancing my teaching lessons by using parable illustration, and also the internet," he wrote. "I also like how I could have students run service-learning programmes to make them experience what they can do to support people in need."

Such positive feedback came as no surprise to Reuben, who says both Ni-Van chaplains appeared to have had a great week.

"There was a lot for them to take in... two conferences on the trot," he says. "I remember them saying they particularly enjoyed the talks given by Brother Damien Price from Australia on transformative service, and the talk given by Rev Hamish Galloway [on the relationship between the schools and the wider Presbyterian Church]. As always with these programmes, it is really in the weeks following that you start to reflect on what you heard. They seemed to value the opportunity to rub shoulders with other chaplains, but they also talked about the difference in the context that they are working in."

Outside conference matters, Reuben said both Kevin and Carl had found New Zealand "freezing cold", but readily mucked in when needed and engaged well with everyone they met.

"It was clear that they both had a deep faith and were passionate about the opportunity they had in their respective schools to bring the Gospel to children. They were keen to find new ways to engage with their own students."

Relationships deepened

A month earlier, five students from Taiwan and five from Vanuatu, were here on another first: they took part in a two-week Youth Leadership Exposure Programme in July, and then went on to the PYM youth leaders' conference at Ohope Marae.

Phil says it was the first time they had brought two groups from different countries together for the one event. "We had previously brought Vanuatu youth to other youth programmes, but this was a new twist on that... it came out of an existing relationship and a desire to deepen it."

The initiative had its roots in an earlier idea mooted by the late Alma Wensi, a youth leader based at the PCV's Centenary Presbyterian Church in Santo. His interest had been piqued after reading about Global Mission and Connect on the Church website.

"Alma reached out to me asking whether some of the Vanuatu youth could come to Connect. I thought this was a great idea, and we slowly worked towards it," says Phil. "I found donors who were willing to help fund the costs, and so we put plans in place for them to come in July 2020. Then late last year I visited Taiwan, hoping to reinstate shared youth exchange programmes with the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan.

"After meeting with them, we agreed to make plans for this year, and I suggested we arrange a joint programme with Vanuatu and Taiwan. Our intention to hold Connect at the Church's national marae made it all the more meaningful," Phil says. "But sadly, Alma died quite suddenly from an infection just a few weeks before the programme took place. It was very poignant having one of the youths from his church present with us."

Phil says the Taiwanese group funded their own international travel, with all other costs being met by donations and Global Mission funds.

Kiwi congregations great hosts

He approached two Kiwi Presbyterian congregations to help with the two-week programme leading up to Connect. The plan saw all 10 visitors spend an initial few days together in Auckland, hosted by St Heliers Presbyterian Church. The Taiwan group then remained in Auckland, still under St Heliers' wing, while the Vanuatu group travelled to Gisborne, where they were hosted by the Mangapapa Union Church. Both groups met up again at Connect.



Kevin Dalesa, left, is a Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu (PCV) chaplain at Seaside School in Port Vila, Vanuatu. He is pictured with Rev Reuben Hardie, St Kentigern's Boys' and Girls' schools chaplain.

Mangapapa's minister Rev Paula Levy had a sound knowledge of Ni-Van language and customs, having lived in Vanuatu with her family for several years. After being welcomed to Gisborne with a voyage on Tairawhiti's waka hourua (voyaging canoe), the visitors helped with the church's preparations for their mid-winter Christmas dinner. In the lead-up to that event, they helped door-knock to extend the invitation to as many members of the local community as possible.

"It was a wonderful experience for my church to host them here," Paula says, "both in terms of what they contributed and what we learned from them. We loved it and wouldn't hesitate to do it again."

Ming Xie, a Taiwanese youth leader at St Heliers, and Hannah North, helped formulate the Auckland programme, initially for both groups and then for the Taiwanese group. After a period of orientation, during which all 10 visitors learned about New Zealand life and culture, they attended a two-day event called *Talk to Me*, aimed at encouraging

dialogue and understanding between people of different faiths and cultures.

Those who stayed in Auckland were swept up in the annual St Heliers *Ideas Explode* school holiday programmes, says Ming.

"Overall, it's been really successful," he says. "I think the overseas students experienced the love of God from a different context. My young people formed really strong relationships, and for the congregation, it provided us with an opportunity to practise the hospitality that the Bible teaches us to do."

Both Ming and Paula say they have received positive feedback from their students, much of which suggests the ripple effect is already being seen in their own churches.

Ming passed on some comments from the Taiwan group. One said it was one of the best trips of their life, another praised the opportunity to make "beautiful memories", while another spoke highly of the chance to build authentic relationships with Kiwis.

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