



Students experience Vanuatu village life

Getting students out of their comfort zones by experiencing life in a totally different culture was one of the aims of an 18-day trip to Vanuatu by members of Dunedin's Brockville Community Church and St John's Anglican Church in July.

Rev Andrew Scott, minister of Brockville Community Church, says the 11-strong delegation included eight students and three adults from the two churches.

"We've been working with St John's for some time and when we suggested the trip to them, they were keen to be involved," says Andrew.

The idea to take youth on an overseas mission trip was first floated in 2014. Andrew spoke with Rev Phil King, the Presbyterian Church's Global Mission coordinator, who suggested Vanuatu, because of the Church's strong connections with the South Pacific nation.

And so began the group's fundraising efforts, which included two market days, an art auction, car washes and quiz nights. Julie Fern, one of the trip coordinators, says considerable effort was needed to raise money for the trip because Brockville is a small church in a low socio-economic area.

"It just shows God's hand in all of this, that we were able to raise so much. For example, we raised \$6K with the art auction, which was amazing," says Julie. "We also had contributions from the Presbyterian Church, the Anglican Church and the West Dunedin Youth and Community Trust, as well as from generous parishioners."

Once there, the group visited Malekula Island, the second largest island in Vanuatu. They were put in contact with Southwest Bay Presbyterian School Principal, John Knox Tolish. The school services five main villages and four smaller villages on the island.



Rev Andrew Scott and the 11-strong delegation from Dunedin's Brockville Community Church and St John's Anglican Church.

As the first Presbyterian Church group to visit Southwest Bay, the aim was to forge relationships with the local villages and particularly the school community. An important aspect of the visit was connecting with the churches of the five villages in the area.

The team packed a guitar, a binder and a laminating machine, as well as sports equipment such as soccer balls and frisbees. They built relationships with the students and spent time training teachers, elders and parents on topics ranging from classroom management to preaching and phonics.

"Our students sat in on classes in the kindy and primary school, they talked about life in New Zealand, shared learnings, and played a lot of sports with them," says Andrew.

A key focus of the trip, which ran from 4 to 22 July, was making introductions throughout the Southwest Bay community, coordinated by the principal and the community's moderator.

One of the most rewarding aspects of the trip was seeing the students grow and adapt to the often basic conditions, says Julie. "It was good for them to see how some people live with so little, yet are so happy. We have so many 'wants' in the Western world but others can live happily without very much."

The team was humbled by the way the locals looked after them, from doing their laundry, to cooking and cleaning. "Carlos and Larros were our cooks for the entire time we were in Malekula and worked incredibly hard to make sure we were well fed and watered," says Andrew. "We offered to help but they wouldn't let us. It really was a wonderful gift."

It's fair to say that the team fell in love with the island and the people so much that returning to New Zealand after 18 days away was something of a challenge.

"Arriving at Auckland Airport and seeing people bump into you and no-one smiling was a bit of a shock to everyone. In Vanuatu everyone smiles at strangers on the street, whereas here if you smile at someone they think you're crazy! I think if we could have, we would have got on the next plane back," laughs Andrew.

Having had such a rich cultural and spiritual experience the group is keen to host five people from the Southwest Bay community next August and is already planning for a return visit to Vanuatu in 2019.

"Now that we've made these valuable connections we want to work more closely with the school and villages and continue to help them in whatever way we can," says Andrew.

Sharon Stephenson [Spanz](#)