

Ni-van visitors welcome in Hawera

Hosting a Ni-van couple from remote North Santo has been a rewarding cultural and spiritual exchange.

Shirley and Norman Manua from the village of Jerivu wanted to experience New Zealand church life first-hand, and get help with logistics for the next stage of a new community building under way in their village, which is being supported by St John's Presbyterian Church in Hawera.

Andrew Murch is the church's outreach elder, and a builder and farmer. He was keen to host the couple, as Norman has lots of influence in Santo's Big Bay.

"He's got a finger in every pie," says Andrew. "That's why we particularly wanted him to be the one to come here."

The relationship began two years earlier when Andrew approached Rev Phil King, co-ordinator of Global Mission, to ask what his family could contribute to the Church's global mission. Phil encouraged Andrew, Karen and their daughter Natalie to visit Vanuatu.

"Phil had a place in mind he thought no-one would go to," explains Andrew. "It's a remote village in North Santo's Big Bay, called Jerivu, which was unaffected by Cyclone Pam. We're always up for an adventure."

That adventure led to the village's ruling elder Norman and his wife Shirley taking the even more daunting journey to New Zealand in June this year.

"Although Norman and Shirley have been to Vila before, it was their first time out of the country," says Andrew. "They live in traditional grass huts with dirt floors, so getting out at Auckland Airport was overwhelming for them. Shirley was reluctant to step onto the escalator. And when we took them to New Plymouth, the sight of a train nearly scared the living daylight out of them."

Apart from sightseeing trips up the mountain, out on farms and to Brooklands Zoo, the Manus were able



Shirley Manua and Karen Murch at St John's Presbyterian Church in Hawera, Taranaki.

to see how the practice of church has evolved in New Zealand, says Andrew, and what faith in God looks like when uncoupled from superstitious beliefs.

"There's a fair bit of black magic still goes on in Vanuatu and they still do church like the missionaries taught them 150 years ago," Andrew explains. "In a traditional church, one man does everything and no-one else speaks, whereas here, everyone participates. They enjoyed seeing that and intend to make changes back home to the way things are done."

Around 50 members of the Hawera congregation turned out on a winter's night to see how the plans for the new centre are shaping up. The 24m x 12m concrete building will serve as a church, safe house, evacuation centre, community centre, conference facility and more. Jerivu has a population of around 130, from two extended families. The new centre will be a shared resource for the eight villages in the parish, dotted along the Big Bay.

Some funding for the new church is coming from Global Mission, but the remaining \$30-\$40,000 is being raised by St John's. The Church has already sent money to continue taking the building

to completion. The village has paid for, and is constructing, the foundations themselves. With only two moulds, the concrete blocks needed are taking time to create and set in place. Next June, a team of volunteers from the Church will head up there to finish whatever still remains undone. In the interim, a container of materials will be shipped from Napier to Luganville, on Santo's southeast coast. From there, the materials will get to the village, bit by bit, on a copra boat that takes supplies to the area on a monthly run and picks up the crops.

The new building is not the only visible change happening in the village. As more seasonal Ni-van workers come to New Zealand from Jerivu and send money home to their immediate families, the village is being transformed, slowly but surely, with tin houses and modern amenities.

The Murch family also anticipates having a long-term relationship with this remote part of North Santo, and bringing further changes. They would like to take international speakers there and hold conferences in the new facility.

"We'll take the world to them, as well as taking them to the world," says Andrew.

Jade Reidy Spanz