



Faith strengthened through cultural experience

Bubble tea, blistering heat and a stronger connection to God are just some of the takeaways three young Aucklanders had from a recent two-week trip to Taiwan.

Thomas Goldfinch (16), Grace Mamea (20) and 23-year-old John Liang were selected as part of the I Love Taiwan (ILT) cross-cultural exchange that brings 16 to 34-year-olds from across the globe to Taiwan.

"In their applications, John, Grace and Thomas all showed a strong commitment to their faith, and learning about, and contributing to, our cross-cultural mission partnerships.

"The fact that they all come from a different ethnic background also sent a strong message about who we are in Aotearoa today. John is Chinese, Grace is Samoan and Thomas is a European New Zealander. They were good ambassadors for the increasingly cross-cultural context in which we live," says Rev Phil King, Global Mission Co-ordinator, who selected this year's participants.

It was the first time Thomas, from St Heliers Presbyterian Church, had been so far from home.

"But this trip was one of the most memorable and incredible of my life," says Thomas who was billeted in New Taipei City. "The church I worked for was on the fifth floor of an apartment building. I taught the kids English songs and games, as well as stories about Christ, and how to be good people in their everyday lives."

He says the experience strengthened his relationship with Christ. "From this, I now feel a much stronger belonging to my local church in New Zealand. It also opened up my mind to the world, which has made me want to travel more."



Thomas Goldfinch, Grace Mamea and John Liang took part in an I Love Taiwan (ILT) cross-cultural exchange. They taught local children English songs and games, as well as stories about Christ.

For Grace Mamea, personal tragedy meant the trip almost didn't happen. A week before the 1 June departure, her mother passed away.

"It was a challenging time for me and I was tossing up whether I should go or stay with my family," says Grace who currently attends West Auckland's Church Unlimited. "With prayer and help from my family, it was decided I should go as applying for this trip was one of the last things Mum and I did together."

Grace says the trip had special significance for her because her mother had previously been to Taiwan with a missionary group. "That made me even more determined to go."

Grace spent time at two churches: one in the city, the other in the mountains. She also enjoyed the local cuisine and shopped so much, she had to buy an extra suitcase. The highlight of her trip was finding out her mother had preached at the Presbyterian Bible College she stayed at.

The third attendee, John Laing from St Heliers Presbyterian Church, says he's always been passionate about intercultural youth work. "ILT was the perfect platform for me to learn more about the Taiwanese culture while also sharing Kiwi culture with the local communities," says John who is currently studying economics and finance at Auckland University.

John served at a church of the indigenous Bunun people in a rural, mountainous part of Taiwan, and helped lead services

and youth events at summer camps, as well as assisting with activities for the elderly and travelling with the church's youth group.

The trio received some coaching on what to expect before they left. Ming Xie, co-ordinator of children and family missions at St Heliers, who arrived from Taiwan a year ago, met with the trio three times before they flew to Taiwan.

"I talked to them about practical considerations, such as what they should bring with them," says Ming. "Along with summer clothes, because Taiwan can be terribly hot at that time of the year, I also advised them to take a small gift that's representative of New Zealand to their hosts because that is culturally appropriate. I know they took New Zealand wine, chocolates and small bone carvings as gifts to their host families."

Ming also encouraged Grace, Thomas and John to try the local cuisine. "The food in Taiwan is amazing so I told them to try everything, especially the bubble tea which was invented in Taiwan, and stinky tofu which is an acquired taste!"

Ming, who has previously completed missions in Myanmar and India, says he was pleased this year's attendees got so much out of the experience, and would encourage others to apply next year.

"God is everywhere, but it's good to be able to experience God in different cultural contexts. Missions are inspiring not only in your own life, but also in your relationship with God."

Sharon Stephenson **Spanz**