



## Volunteers quickly rebuild cyclone damaged church

**When a group of eight Presbyterians arrived in a Vanuatu village in June to help rebuild their cyclone-devastated church, there were a few local eyebrows raised. The prevailing thought was that most of the well-meaning volunteers might have been slightly too “geriatric” for the task... but that view soon changed.**

Seven and a half days after the team arrived at Lamnatu village on Vanuatu’s Tanna Island, the rebuild was complete.

A 12m by 6m church, which doubles as the village meeting house, had been raised from the original concrete slab floor, which had been left bare when Cyclone Pam destroyed its predecessor in March 2015.

The New Zealand church members also succeeded in reinstating the village’s roof water storage supply to an existing concrete storage tank, bringing a much-needed daily supply of clean water to Lamnatu residents. Until then, pumped water had been available only once a week.

Pulling it all together was a team of eight from Whangarei, Whanganui, and Palmerston North.

They were led by project designer Garth Stevenson from Whanganui’s St Paul’s Presbyterian Church. Father and son duo, Peter and McCade Monk, represented Palmerston North’s St Alban’s Presbyterian Church, and Whangarei’s St Andrew’s Presbyterian Church fielded five members – Kevin Hollis, David McFarland, John Nicole, Rick Tillett and Dave Roke. The latter is the convenor of the St Andrew’s overseas mission group.

Imbued with a common desire to provide cyclone relief wherever it was needed, the men forged warm friendships as they worked shoulder-to-shoulder alongside villagers. Appetising meals were provided by local women throughout the rebuild, and at the end of the visitors’ 10-day stay, the village prepared a great feast as a mark of thanks. Many of the locals, says Dave Roke, were overcome with gratitude. When the group left the island, it was with a heartfelt offer that they were welcome to return at any time.

The visit was so successful that plans are now underway for team leader Garth Stevenson – who is an adopted member of Lamnatu village – to attend the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu’s national conference in the village next February. The newly-dedicated church will be the focus of activities during that conference week.

Garth has a long-standing relationship with the Lamnatu village and its people, having first been there to help rebuild the old church after it was damaged in a 2005 cyclone.

“I’ve continued to go back... doing water supplies, building schools and so on. After a request, I took over moulds to make concrete blocks, and we built a ladies’ hall for the village,” he explains. “This is what they sheltered in during Cyclone Pam.”



Eight Presbyterians volunteered to work alongside locals to rebuild the Lamnatu village church in just seven and a half days.

On hearing of the devastation caused by the 2015 storm Garth started putting together another rebuild project and called on volunteers to join him.

Most of the funding for the latest trip came from Whanganui Presbyterian churches, who have steadfastly supported Garth’s projects over the past 12 years. Additional funds were raised by the Whangarei team and there was a donation from Global Mission.

“I also had donations from several groups and service clubs I spoke to,” Garth says, “and an offer to top-up from benefactors.”

The Kiwi team brought a range of skills to the task. Included in their number were a couple of retired part-time builders, three experienced rural lifestyle blockers and an engineer. Local men and women of all ages readily stepped up to swell the ranks of workers.

As is the way with projects of this sort, not everything ran smoothly. Interruptions in the supply and delivery of building materials almost saw the project abandoned at one stage, and Dave says that without the untiring support of Neville and Gloria Jones – Global Mission workers who serve with the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu – the project may not have succeeded at all.

As David McFarland puts it, “It seemed the bigger the need, the more God seemed to assist”.

But succeed it did. The rebuild has had a huge positive impact on the people of Lamnatu and continues to be widely applauded.

Plans are afoot for other projects, including a rebuild of the pastor’s damaged house, and the strong links forged during construction are likely to continue well into the future.

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