

Celebrating 70 years 1949-2019 **A brief history: 'From Unlikely beginnings'.**

The First Stage

What began as a nightmare in the crucible of suffering and death on the infamous Thai Burma railway, slowly with difficulty and in great pain, became a dream of enduring hope. On the 4th of April 1949 that hope took a first step to becoming a reality.

The story begins with the fall of Singapore on the 15th February 1942 well known to most Australians. However, with the passage of time we can forget some of the tragic details. As a salutary reminder, here are some of the most significant statistics: over 22,000 Australian were made prisoners of the Japanese in camps throughout Asia and Japan. Of this total 13,000 together with 60,000 allied POWS and as many as 150,000 Asians (referred to by the Japanese as "romusha") were assigned to the construction of the railway.

By the time the war ended on the 15th August 1945, over one third of the Australian prisoners had died- died from pestilential tropical diseases, of dysentery, of infected bone deep ulcers, beriberi, malaria, near starvation and violent merciless beatings by the guards. A cauldron of suffering indeed.

Stan Arneil one of the survivors, on his return to Australia published a book entitled "One man's war". It was the diary he kept as a prisoner and it covers the entire period of imprisonment from 1942 through the Burma railway camps, to his return to Changi and his repatriation to Australia in October 1945.

Arneil kept the diary - written on scraps of stolen paper - partly for his family and partly to help himself stay sane. His simple, direct account of day-to-day prison camp existence in all its horror is vivid and moving. Arneil's struggles with his own depression, illnesses and his rarely abating homesickness are a moving testimony to an individual's courage and resilience in appalling conditions. Throughout his ordeal, Arneil never lost his faith, his extraordinary optimism, humanity and will to survive. He always managed to find something for which to be grateful - even when he was barely alive.

Father Lionel Marsden a Marist Chaplain to the 13th Australian General Hospital (AGH), part of the Australia's 8th Division, was also captured at the fall of Singapore and like Stan spent four years as a prisoner in Changi and ministering to the prisoners there and along the Railway.

Stan and Lionel met for the first time in Sydney after repatriation. They became close friends. During the course of their conversations Lionel shared a promise he had made to his fellow prisoners that if he survived the war and Japan was defeated, he would endeavour to go to Japan as a missionary to share his faith and speak of forgiveness and peace.

And so, from the most unlikely of places and in the most unlikely of conditions a seed had been sown. Stan expressed his interest in helping make the promise a reality.

Father Jim Bell the Provincial in Australia at that time- strongly supported Lionel and negotiated with the General Administration in Rome to establish a mission in Japan. Permission was granted but on two conditions: the Australian Province would supply the men and fund the enterprise.

The second condition was indeed a challenge – anti-Japanese feelings were understandably very strong in Australia. There were too many emaciated images of POWs returning home with their stories like that of Stan's of the appalling treatment and deprivation they had endured and too many heart-breaking lists of those who did not return from the battlefields.

How would the funds, needed for this Marist project, be gathered in Australia- itself still struggling with wartime restrictions and shortages. Sugar rationing continued until 1947 and meat until 1948. And what of the situation in Japan reeling from saturation fire-bombing of the cities- in one city, and on one night alone:

It was the night of 9/10 March 1945 the United States Army Air Forces conducted a devastating firebombing raid on Tokyo. This attack is known as the Great Tokyo Air Raid. During the raid, bombs dropped from 279 Boeing B-29 Superfortress heavy bombers burned out much of eastern Tokyo. More than 88,000 and possibly over 100,000 Japanese, mostly civilians, were killed and one million left homeless, making it the single most destructive air attack of World War II- and then of course there was the annihilation of the peoples and cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by two atomic bombs.

But it came to pass that a group of friends, relatives, and fellow POWS began to gather at the invitation of Lionel to search for a way to fulfil his dream. They established the Marist Japanese Mission League. Stan Arneil agreed to be the honorary secretary.

His first action was to write a small pamphlet entitled “What is the Marist Japanese Mission League?”

He wrote:

“The idea was born in a Japanese Prison camp. This country must never forget the terrible years, passed by so many, of her finest young men in the prison camps and working groups whilst prisoners of the Japanese. There were days when the Christian virtues of fortitude, courage, and heroic example were the inspiration of existence.

“Thousands of allied soldiers will remember Father Marsden. As their Chaplain he was with them in sickness, buried them when they died, and worked with them on the Burma Railway. There was born the determination to go to Japan as a missionary, and he took as his slogan: for every sleeper lain, a Christian Japanese, for every Australian life a Christian Japanese.

“The primary object of the Marist Japanese Mission League is to assist Australian Marists in their efforts to share the Catholic faith and its ideals of Christian life especially those of compassion and forgiveness, to the Japanese.

Also:

“A living memorial to the Australian 8th Division, to those men who died on the Burma Thailand Railway and in the prison camps, to those killed in Burma and in the jungles of Malaya, to all those men who gave their lives in the cause of freedom, in this way we will perpetuate their memory.”

Stan Arneil

Honorary Secretary

Marist Japanese Mission League

On the 3rd of April 1949 Fr Marsden was officially appointed as the first Superior of the Japanese Marist Mission. The following evening over 400 supporters gathered in the vestibule of the Lower Town Hall in Sydney to listen to Padre Marsden share his story, his vision, his enduring hope and farewell him as he departed for Japan.

Lionel's first view of Japan was from the deck of the SS Changti- the hills of Kure, on the second of May 1949. He immediately set about making contact with Dioceses and with Religious Congregations many of whom had arrived as early as 1947 with the encouragement not only of Church authorities but of the Commander in Chief of the USA occupying forces- General Douglas MacArthur- a man of deep Christian faith who unabashedly stated in 1955:

"No phase of the occupation has left me with a greater sense of personal satisfaction than my spiritual stewardship." He personally encouraged Religious groups to come to a country that has not only been destroyed but also "spiritually devastated"-

MacArthur: "Send missionaries," he pleaded to a number of religious groups, "And Bibles." The Bible became a best seller in Japan.

The belief or hope among Catholic circles that, after the shattering collapse of the expansionist militaristic policy, a great many Japanese would be ready to turn away from the horrors of war and embrace Christianity- "if only it was preached to them."

Separately and before Marsden's initiative, Australia was one of the countries which responded to this call. In 1946 Rome requested Cardinal Gilroy to visit Japan and enquire from the Japanese Bishops about the needs of the Church there.

In November he and his good friend Bishop McCabe flew to Japan in an Air Force plane provided by the Australian Prime Minister Ben Chifley, for the purpose. They visited Tokyo and other major centres but particularly Nagasaki a Catholic Centre since the time of St Francis Xavier. There they consulted Bishop Yamaguchi with whom they had both studied in Rome. He asked for priests and nuns.

The result of this visit was that 14 Australian priests came to work in Japan in the dioceses of Nagasaki, Osaka, Fukuoka and Yokohama. Eleven of them were from Gilroy's Archdiocese.

After spending months meeting and negotiating with Church authorities and Religious Congregations as to where the Marists might establish their Mission, the Maryknoll Fathers who had been working in the Kyoto diocese even before the war and with the approval of the Prefect Apostolic Bishop Furuya, Marists might consider accepting the responsibility of the Nara Prefecture which was part of the diocese.

So, it was, as Marsden wrote to the Apostolic Delegate:

“On January 1st 1951, The Society of Mary, at the invitation of the Prefect Apostolic, took responsibility for the civil prefecture of Nara. A formal contract legalising this arrangement will be entered into by the parties concerned when the approval of your Excellency (Maximilien de Furstenberg) has been given to its terms.”

Nara is referred to as the Cradle of Buddhism in Japan and was the first National Capital. Today it is redolent with beautifully preserved reminders of this history.

At the time the Society of Mary accepted Nara, there was just one Church, which had been built in 1932 in the classically beautiful Japanese style. A kindergarten was added soon after the war by the resident parish priest, Father Sugihara, thanks to the generosity of some of the US occupation Marines who were stationed in Nara and the local Chamber of Commerce.

It was this Church and this Kindergarten that led to the realisation of that dream of enduring hope Marsden shared with his fellow prisoners of war along the Thai-Burma railway.

Meanwhile back in Australia the Japanese Marist Mission League was busy about fulfilling the commitment it made at the time of that gathering in the Town Hall. The committee worked tirelessly, ably supported by the enthusiasm of its indefatigable honorary treasurer Father John Glynn who was soon to become the first Director of the enterprise.

Membership of the League rapidly expanded by using something akin to a pyramid scheme- each new member was encouraged to invite friends and family members to join and they in turn were to search for others. Each one signed up to “say a prayer and give a pound a year”- and in one Newsletter a gentle reminder was sent to those who had forgotten to send their pound. By the end of 1950 the League boasted six hundred members.

One notable Companion, as members were called, was the Irish film star Maureen O’Hara who while on a visit to Sydney, met with some members of the Committee. Moved by the story of the Japanese Marist Mission League, Maureen signed up on the spot promising to invite her family members back home in Ireland to join. Public concerts, raffles, home parties, race days and the Rice Bowl appeal were just some of the ways funds were raised for the nascent Marist mission in Nara.

In December 1951, the Newsletter 18 months after the League was formed, gave an account of funds raised. The impressive total 3136 pounds 2 shillings and three pence. (The modern key board does not have these symbols).

The Newsletter, although a very simple hand typed printout in its first two years, was critically important. It was a personal link between the Marists in Japan and the Companions. A few months after Marsden arrived in Japan, he was joined by two young Marists from Australia - Fathers Muldoon and Mills, close friends and affectionately known as "Milly and Mully". They wrote stories of their difficulties in adjusting to this new culture and language but especially of their firsthand experience of the poverty and hunger of the people still struggling with the effects of the war five years later.

Father Muldoon, brother of Bishop Muldoon, was noted for his dry humour. After some years in Japan he commented that "I have eaten so much raw fish since I arrived here, my tummy goes in and out with the tide."

During the 1950s a steady flow of priests from Australia enabled the Marists to expand their presence in Nara. Land was purchased, churches and kindergartens were built, and social welfare activities supported.

One of the first properties Marsden purchased was by Japanese standards quite large- 15,000 tsubos or 12 acres. Sited at the edge of the village of Kuzu in a most beautiful rural setting in the southern end of Nara. It was a prescient purchase by Marsden and helped to validate his vision.

The machinery factory built on the property to support the war had been demolished but a substantial ferro concrete Administration building together with a small hall, a mess hut and three cottages. The cost? Three million yen, roughly 4000 Australian pounds. A bargain.

Kuzu has become emblematic of the Marist Mission in Japan. And for these reasons:

- The Administration block was converted into a Church and a place for the priest to live.
- A Kindergarten was built for the children of the village and a bus purchased to transport those who lived in the surrounding Yosihno Mountains.
- To accommodate the constant increase of children a new Church was built.
- An old peoples' home was established, well before the Government became involved in age care.
- A House was built for the Good Samaritan Sisters who ministered at the Home and Kindergarten
- On the other side of the creek which runs through the property a cemetery was added.

- In 1979 during the height of the exodus of boat people fleeing Vietnam a Refugee camp was established.
- A “toy” Library – a place where disabled children with family members could stay for respite care assisted by volunteers was built.

In summary, the Marist Mission in Japan from the outset was involved in establishing Christian communities, education of children, aged care and social welfare and through these ministries endeavoured, with some failures and with some successes, to present the compassionate and forgiving love of Christ- as Lionel Marsden had hoped.

On the 6th November 1960 the Marist Japanese Mission League moved from its 12ft by 15ft “store room” office into a brand new one beside the Villa Maria Church in Hunters Hill. Father Glynn wrote “this new centre is an indication of the spectacular growth of the Marist Japanese Mission League. A wonderful tribute to the first members of the League who gathered together in 1949.”

In the mid 60s the Marist Japanese Mission League changed its name to the Marist Mission Centre. There was a very significant reason for this. Japan had rapidly rebuilt and was re-established its economy. The Marist Mission in Japan continuing to expand as new Marists joined the Mission from Australia and other Marist Provinces. At the same time the generosity and numbers of the supporters of the Mission Centre increased. These factors enabled the Mission Centre to turn its attention to and support the island States of the Pacific still impacted by the war where Marists had been working since 1837.

In the April 1964 the Marist Newsletter the then Marist Priest Bernard Brosnan wrote from his Siwai Mission on the rugged West coast of Bougainville:

“The conditions of the people are something you have to see to believe. It is hard to see how people can live in so much dirt and sickness. Their two room leaf houses are dirty and dark and often full of scorpions, centipedes, rotting waste food and smoke from their cooking fires. Many suffer from malaria or have large tropical ulcers unlike anything you have seen”. (except those POWs on the Railway).

Bernard was appalled at the infant mortality rate- the closest hospital was over 80 kilometres through open sea in a canoe and there were no medical staff in the village.

The Marist Mission Centre set about raising funds. Brosnan a skilled tradesman built the hospital and two volunteer nurses from Australia provided the medical care.

This was the first of many such projects the Centre was to support in the coming years. Schools, educational programs, churches relief funds for the villages, schools and mission stations destroyed by the frequent typhoons that roar across the Pacific.

Second stage 1966-1990

In 1965 John Glynn who had been the Director of the Marist Mission Centre and editor of the Harvest Magazine for the past 14 years was appointed the Provincial of the Marist Province of Australia. The Japanese mission was part of the Australian Province. He immediately invited Father Michael O'Halloran to become the new Director.

He accepted and for the next 24 years dedicated his life to the ongoing work of the Mission Centre. From the beginning with characteristic energy and single-minded commitment he pursued his vision which was threefold:

Firstly, he recognised the critical importance of the Companions or supporters who had signed on from the beginning and whose numbers had increased over the subsequent years; and the importance of the prayers, the sacrifices and the generosity of this marvellous network. In a practical way he insisted that every donation be acknowledge within fourteen days.

Secondly, he focused on Christ's challenge to His church that his word and love be preached to all nations. Although he was never to go as a missionary, he had a deep and abiding respect and love for those who did and gave his priestly ministry to their support and the support of those they served.

Thirdly, he focussed in a special way on projects for the destitute the marginalised and the starving. This emphasis was powerfully illustrated in the articles and letters printed in the Newsletter. Not just about Marist projects but compelling stories with requests from other Religious groups and NGOs at the rockface of need.

This development broadened the appeal of the Marist Mission Centre attracting a much wider audience and hence more donors.

Father Michael to cope with this development, realised he would need to engage a small staff and volunteers. To name them all would be impossible but two need to be mentioned- Dorothy Thomas who became his secretary for all his time as Director and Helen Hall who from 1969 until 1985 was the editor of the Newsletter.

These were the years of "many hands make light work" especially in an enterprise like the Mission Centre, where letters needed to be typed with

carbon paper, records of donors kept on yellow cards and stored in those special draws (at one time there was upward of 8,000 names), Newsletter folded and placed in hand written envelopes, tax stamps kept to mention just a few of the tasks. The volunteers came every Tuesday and, when not otherwise occupied would laboriously cut used stamps for sale.

A chance meeting in 1969 with an American Redemptorist priest (Father Richard Thiele) in Bangkok and a Marist on his way home from Rome led to an enduring relationship between the Marist Mission Centre and the Redemptorists living and working in Thailand.

Father Richard was on a visit to collect medicines and other necessities for some of the lepers of Non Sombun District Northern Thailand where he had been working for the past 10 years. He shared something of his work in an article for the Newsletter:

“There are over five thousand lepers in the district of which about 800 are Catholic. We have a clinic in Ban Nai which primarily cares for leper patients, but poor people come from afar and no one is turned away. We are planning to build a primary school for the children of the lepers and how badly it is needed. The children are the poorest of the poor, dressed in rags and encrusted with dirt. Their parents spend days and nights in the forest seven miles away making charcoal which they sell for a very low price- it’s illegal.”

In the coming years Father Richard kept in contact with the Mission Centre with his many articles for the Newsletter- our donors always responded with great generosity as they did for other Redemptorists’ projects such as the Klong Toey slum.

In a crowded cluttered part of Bangkok sits one of the most notorious slums in the world- Klong Toey built on stilts over a noisome, fetid swamp. It is here that Father Joe Maier (one of the American Redemptorists) has been working for almost 50 years. He first contacted the Mission Centre back in the early 1970s with stories of grim poverty, crime, destitution, drug addiction and HIV and AIDS laced with examples of the resilience of the human spirit and the importance of bringing education to the children of the slums.

He has written a book about his life in the slums entitled “Welcome to the Bangkok Slaughter House - The battle for Human Dignity in Bangkok’s Bleakest Slum.”

The review states that: “he established more than thirty schools, five shelters for street kids, and the city's first AIDS hospice and home for AIDS mothers with AIDS kids - working with and in opposition to authority, while being

threatened and shot at and, ultimately, praised by even his enemies. Here he tells the stories of the poorest of Thailand's poor.

These are just some examples of the expanding outreach by the Centre to the needs of the Church's mission made possible by the increase in the number of donors.

The Mission Centre applied for and received the facility to issue Tax deductible receipts and was registered as an Australian Overseas Aid Agency. As a consequence, it became eligible to receive grants from AusAid for approved projects. Both of these additions helped to further expand the capacity of the MMC to help where help was needed.

Third Stage 1990-1994

The second stage of the MMC came to a sad end with the death of Father Michael. He died on the 7th January 1990. A quote from the Marist Fathers' Remembrance book captures the man, his life and his work succinctly and honestly:

"from the beginning of his tenure as Director he demonstrated the skill and enthusiasm necessary to build on solid foundation already established. Despite deteriorating health from 1985 onwards, he remained in charge of the Mission Centre to the end. By any yardstick he was marvellously successful during his 24 years, generating substantial funds for Marist Missions in Japan, in the Pacific and the Philippines and Africa and for the development and emergency relief projects in Thailand, Hong Kong and Ethiopia. He maintained pastoral contact with thousands of donors by a well-honed office system of individual letter writing. A practical and an uncomplicated man, he had an innate suspicion of theorists and dreamers. He endeared himself to others by his jovial personality, his propensity to break into song at social gatherings, and robust sense of humour.

Within days of Father Michael's death, a new Director was appointed, Father Jim Carty. During his years working in Japan as a missionary, he had been a recipient of the generosity of the Marist Mission Centre and by a quirk of history was in Japan with his family when Father Marsden arrived in Tokyo in May 1949. Lionel stayed at the Carty household with Father Harry Reid MSC for over week. Being the only boy in the family and long before girls were permitted to serve, Jim was required to serve both masses each day, all in Latin including the so-called last Gospel at the end of each mass. It was as a tough gig for an easily distracted eight-year-old.

In his first letter to donors Father Jim wrote:

“The outpouring of sorrow and assurances of prayers received in letters following the news of Father Michael ‘s death was moving and heartfelt. These letters local and from around the world sketched a wonderful mosaic of the life, the person and his untiring commitment to the Mission Centre.

“Conscious of the historical significance of this transition and of Father Michael’s extraordinary achievements, it is with considerable unease that I accept this role. However, I will, confident in Mary our Mother’s continuing care and intercession, pledge myself to the preserving and nurturing of the great spirit of generosity that underpins the life of the Marist Mission Centre and focus on those three foundational pillars: close and frequent communications with our donors, support for our missionaries and robustly responding to the Gospel imperative of Matthew Chapter 25.

The good news came quickly.

Firstly: Dorothy Thomas the secretary, amanuensis, factotum, part time nurse etc since June 21st1966, agreed to continue. For many reasons this was an answer to prayer but specially because of her encyclopaedic memory. Although we had the card system recording all the details of our donors, she knew them all and was able to share not only what was on the cards but other helpful details – all 5000 plus (some suggest it was closer to 8000).

Secondly: Dorothy, looking ahead, suggested we needed another member of staff. Her recommendation was Margaret Walker a parishioner of Hunters Hill Parish. Employing Margaret proved to be serendipitous and critical for the future of the Mission Centre. She brought with her many years of experience as an executive secretary for Vogue magazine, the professional skills of a finance manager and a warm engaging personality so important in welcoming visiting missionaries, donors and friends to the Centre.

Remember MDOS? Microsoft Disc Operating System. It was being developed in the 80s and 90s. The computer was fast appearing in offices- The Mission Centre needed to computerise - Over the next three years efficient computer systems were introduced, replacing the demanding time-consuming repetitive hand functions of the past. During those three years the staff were able to download the information stored in the memory bank of Dorothy. After which Dorothy quietly retired with the profound gratitude for the monumental contribution that she made to the MMC, from all of us who came to know her over the past 27 years.

Requests for assistance continued apace during the next five years. Here are just a few that appeared in the Newsletter.

A New Mission in the Philippines

In 1980 the Marist Fathers established a new Mission in the Philippines, based in the southern island of Mindanao- they were open to accepting places of great need, working alongside the people and living their simple life.

One such place was Diwalwal. Some years before, high in the mountains by the same name, gold was discovered. Few words in any language like the word "Gold" can stir such passion or entice such risk taking. Diwalwal was no exception. When the first two Marists arrived (one was the current Superior General) they were confronted with what looked like a scene from Hades. Perched on the side of precipitous hillsides were as many as 80,000 people living in fragile wooden shacks supported by long poles which regularly collapsed after heavy rain; and working in the mine shafts which also frequently caved in burying the miners.

The Marists established a centre, a simple safe haven for prayer, rest and help in an otherwise desperate, dangerous and unforgiving environment. The place was described by the then Superior General as "the most difficult mission that he knows of anywhere in the world."

Bougainville Crisis

Bougainville is a name written large in three places:

1. the mission history of the Society of Mary dating back to Christmas Eve 1836 when the first group of Marists left France for the Islands of the Western Pacific, and eventually included Bougainville.
2. The history of the 2nd World war, with battles like Guadalcanal and Henderson Airfield well remembered.
3. The opening of the copper mine which as predicted led to severe damage to the culture and social structure of the people of Bougainville which in turn led to the crisis.

The crisis was precipitated by the people of the island declaring independence from PNG in May 1990. A total embargo was imposed and for the next ten years a war was waged claiming as many as 10,000 lives- a staggering number from a population of just over 200,000. During this time, MMC joined with four other NGOs to provide basic medicines and supplies initially via the backdoor through the Solomon Islands and then eventually in cooperation with the

Australian Government following the lifting of the embargo with the signing of the Honiara Declaration.

The requests for assistance increased during the next five years including the following projects:

Tuit hospital in rural Bangladesh, staffed by the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary led by Sister Jenny Clark a medical doctor. Tuit is a dirt-poor village subject to the vagaries of the powerful monsoons.

Among the many horrifying images that filled our TV screens towards the end of the Vietnam War, was the crash of the huge Galaxy transport plane as it left Saigon for the United States filled with orphans and disabled children in an operation known as “babylift”. 78 of the more than 200 children died, many more were seriously injured. These children had been cared for by the **“Friends for all Children”** NGO based in Vietnam and led by the indomitable Australian Rosemary Taylor in collaboration with the Sister Elizabeth Le Thi Thanh and her Sisters at Phu My- in Saigon a place for the many war orphans, disabled children and displaced elderly.

From this time the Mission Centre established a long and effective partnership with the wonderful, compassionate ministry of Phu My and Friends for all Children- this was possible, once again, because of the generosity of our donors.

Back in 1990 an article about the work of Sister Michelle Lopez a Good Shepherd sister working in Thailand appeared in our Newsletter. The introduction stated: According to fairly recent statistics drawn up by the Child Protection and Anti-slavery Association about 12% of the estimated one million prostitutes in Thailand are children under the age of 14.

Sister Michelle, who at considerable risk to her own life, set up a safe place for the care of some of these children. She is still there all these years later- thanks to Michelle and her Sisters during the time many children have been saved from a life of degradation and equipped with other income generating skills.

We are well aware that the problem of sexual abuse and slavery continues to flourish world-wide. The MMC is responding to this sad reality with the “Girls at Risk” centre in Davao City, Philippines, recently taken over by the Marist Sisters.

Fourth Stage 1995- 1997

In late August 1994 Father Jim was appointed as Provincial of the Marist Fathers Province for Australia. A search for a replacement began.

The search for a new Director was short. Putting aside the process of advertising for the position, it was decided to appoint a Marist sister highly recommended by someone well acquainted with her experience and professional skills. The choice was indeed a practical expression of and a response to the call for solidarity with and collaboration between the branches of the Marist Family, a feature already in play in the life of the MMC as evidenced in the stories printed in the Newsletters.

“We are most grateful to the Sisters who have made Sister Vivienne Goldstein available for this role.”

In a response to a request to write a reflection of her time at MMC, she wrote:

“What stands out for me is the witness to Partnership for Mission set before me at the outset and during my three years of participation in the life of MMC. I had never before experienced a partnership comprised of such a wide variety of people across such huge distances. I met people – lay and religious – in Bougainville, Burma, Fiji, Hong Kong, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam who were working in difficult, often dangerous, situations to transform the lives of those suffering the effects of poverty, abuse, discrimination and war.

“In Australia I worked with a truly committed office staff, with technical assistants, financial consultants, publishers, government representatives and members of other NGOs. I also worked with an extraordinary band of dedicated volunteers, from those who prepared the newsletter for posting and stamps for selling, to those who offered their services in overseas projects. Then there were the donors and fund-raisers - faithful, caring people who kept giving and giving...”

The transition was seamless. Waiting to receive Sister were the three staff members- Margaret Walker, Pat Robinson and Sue Dobson (daughter of Dorothy Thomas) and of course the dedicated band of volunteers.

The appointment of a woman was not only historical but highly intuitive. Sister’s first journey to the Pacific was to the troubled island of Bougainville still

recovering from 10 years of civil war, to attend a special workshop through BEST (Business Enterprise Support Team) supported by MMC. It was a workshop on Leadership training with special emphasis on women- after all Bougainville is a matrilineal society and it was the women who proved themselves as peace advocates during the crisis. And the conference was led by Flavia, Elizabeth and Lilly!

In 1996 Sister Viv wrote of Sr Joan Evans, a Presentation Sister from Perth, who was working in the Human Development Centre in the Klong Toey slum one of Fr Joe Maier's projects. Its particular focus was care of HIV and AIDs sufferers and especially children. Joan, who had been working in the slums for five years, was fluent in Thai and greatly respected for her self-effacing manner and her practical compassion- her home was alongside a huge slaughter house.

In 1996 Father James Murphy died. His story is recorded in the March 1997 edition of the Newsletter. The reason? He was the first President of the Japanese Marist Mission League back in 1949, keen to go to Japan to join Lionel, but needed for teaching at the Seminary. However, at the advanced age of 74, Jim accepted an invitation to go to Vanuatu to teach at the High School. His fluent French and years as a High School teacher enabled him to quickly slip back into the class room. He stayed four years.

After three very busy and productive years Sister Vivienne completed her three year term as Director. She brought with her a feminine perspective and insights to the task, adding yet another special contribution to the narrative of the Mission Centre.

Fifth Stage- 1998- 2006

Sister Vivienne was succeeded in 1998 by Father Ron Nissen. Fr Ron a man of extensive pastoral experience brought to the task of Executive Director endless energy, creativity and perseverance. Here are just some of his more notable initiatives:

AusAID:

Father Ron was to significantly develop MMC's access to Australia's overseas development aid budget, negotiating funds from the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) for:

- Bougainville: continued post-crisis trauma counselling, small business and training projects
- Cambodia: the late Br Terry Heinrich's pioneering work of non-formal education for physically disabled children

- Bangladesh, Cambodia and northern Thailand: rural development and management training
- China: fresh water and sanitation projects
- Peru: women's business and skills development
- Solomon Islands: rural training programs

MMC's annual allowance from AusAID was \$100,000. However, the success of the Bougainville projects led AusAID to entrust close to \$2,000,000 to MMC during Father Ron's term.

As well as AusAID-funded projects, MMC continued its support of:

- East Timor: Tetum language programs conducted by the Sisters of St Joseph
- Bangladesh: SMSM Sisters' care for disabled children, Dhaka
- Hong Kong: Maryknoller, Fr Adam Gudalefsky's work in disability care training throughout Asia
- Thailand: Mercy Centre in Bangkok's Klong Toey slums, caring for people with HIV, kindergarten and primary education, youth skills training
- Thailand: Good Shepherd Sisters' work in education and skills training, women, girls and kindergarten, Din Daeng, Bangkok
- Vietnam and Thailand: Friends for all children (Rosemary Taylor & associates), and the Phu My program

With the outbreak of HIV/AIDS in Thailand, a new project was the support of the Redemptorists' Sarnelli House centre for HIV children and orphans and its outreach program for HIV adults along the Mekong River near Nongkhai, northern Thailand.

MMC Development Committee

An important initiative during Fr Ron's time was the establishment of MMC's Development Committee which undertook responsibility for assessing and overseeing projects and funding.

The Committee's mostly lay membership included donors, volunteers, financial and management experts and representation from the Marist provincial leadership. Committee members took turn in leading a Marist reflection at each of the quarterly meetings.

Committee members also visited AusAID project areas and participated in training programs.

Marist Fathers International Care (MFIM) projects

By Fr Ron's time, MMC had set up two funding accounts. With tax deductible donations came the need to comply with government development aid

criteria. AusAID funds were handled through this account, AMCOA (Australian Marist Centre Overseas Aid).

If donors did not seek tax deductibility, then funds, through MFIM, could be used more widely, including the important and ongoing support of Marist novices and seminarians in their formation.

With the help of bequests to the MFIM account, MMC was able to fund:

- Cambodia: building 'Villa Maria' hostel for physically disabled young people, seeking secondary education and employment, Phnom Penh
- Bangladesh: purchase of a building for the Don Bosco Students Home, young men's hostel, Dhaka
- Thailand: building St Patrick's accommodation for orphans at Sarnelli mission, Nongkhai

Early in Fr Ron's directorship there was a severe drop in value of the Aussie dollar. At this time MMC's annual amount to the Marists' international mission was levied in US dollars. Faced with a shortage of MFIM funds, Fr Ron decided to seek sponsorship for what was to become an annual fund-raising bicycle ride, 'Cycling for Seminarians'. MMC donors responded enthusiastically with \$67,000 for his 1,000 km ride. The ride continues today, modified in its extent, with Brother Charlie Randle SM, 'Cycling for Children'.

Thai-Burma border

One of Father Ron's first calls at MMC was to support projects in several Burmese refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. Before long he had established MMC's *Asia-Pacific Youth Development Program* throughout seven border camps supporting:

- young people's safe refuge hostels
- leadership and management courses
- development projects for the physically-disabled

In 2004 Father Ron worked with Australian Catholic University to establish its online diploma course for Burmese youth, centre at Maesot, Thailand.

He recalls an early visit to Maera Moo camp: a day-long truck, boat and elephant ride to a remote hostel in the border jungle. Years later, students from this hostel sought help to access the ACU program, which would in turn lead to the Bridge Program commenced in 2011 to prepare young refugees in their application for tertiary studies. The Bridge Program continues today led by its own graduates.

Marist International Care

As MMC director, Father Jim Carty had established 'Marist International Care' as an umbrella for placement of aid volunteers in Asia-Pacific.

During Father Ron's time, M.I.C. placed five volunteers at Sarnelli House and True Life in God missions, Thailand. One of these, Kate O'Riordan, is now a key figure in HIV care and education in the Mekong region of Thailand.

One way Father Ron used to promote M.I.C. was to invite young people to see how 'the other half' lived in mission areas. So was established 'TOH' ('The Other Half') experience.

In 2000 Father Ron, accompanied by lay Marists, Kevin and Trish McGrory, led the first TOH to Thailand and Cambodia with fifteen young adults from Australia and the Pacific. The group included two Marist seminarians from the Oceania Marist province. In later TOHs, young Marists from NZ, the Philippines, PNG, Solomon Islands, Bougainville, Fiji and Tonga joined the group, anticipating the emergence of 'MAP' (Marist Asia-Pacific) interaction between Marist units of the region.

TOH journeys continued throughout Father Ron's term, visiting refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border, and MMC projects in Thailand, Bangladesh and Cambodia. Several TOH-ers have made aid and development work their career in life.

6th Stage 2007-2015

In early 2007 Father Kevin Stewart from New Zealand via the Philippines working with the Marist team in Mindanao was appointed to replace Father Ron who had completed nine very productive and blessed years.

Kevin's experience in developing local grass roots programs in and around Davao was invaluable for his new task.

Recently he wrote a retrospective of his nine years as Director:

"My predecessor Father Ron's transition advice on that 1st April 2007, was simple and direct: Kevin, remember donors are our treasure, make them your number one priority".

The adventure began backed by a remarkable and growing group of generous donors.

MMC continued its tradition of personalising its relationships—handwritten “thank yous” on receipts; handwritten responses to health issues and requests for prayers; hospitality to donors who popped into the MMC.

In a real sense, donors became MMC ‘parishioners’.

“Programs were usually off the cement roads of Asia-Pacific in the hands of Marist Family members living at the grass-roots: from the Bangladesh slums of the Marist Missionary Sisters; charcoal and fish factories exploiting Burmese economic-refugees ministered to by Marist Fathers; prostitutes’ children and tribal minority children eking a living begging on the Davao waterfront protected by Marist Sisters; La Valla Education Centre for children with major physical disabilities run by the Marist Brothers in Cambodia. In the Pacific, programs tended to be more mission-based and formal education and formation of Marist Religious. Projects were also undertaken in the more remote isolated areas of Melanesia.

“The structure of the MMC remained essentially the same as in the decades before, although they slowly evolved: decisions regarding the acceptance of projects were made locally to counter the tendency towards ‘financial colonialism’ MMC’s dedicated office team generally saw themselves as lay-Marists rather than employees. Agnes Siveram and Jane Cecilia as office managers continued the tradition of Dorothy Thomas (under the formidable Fr. O’Halloran) and Margaret Walker taking to heart Pope Francis’ admonition that bureaucracy must never smother one’s capacity to respond to emergency needs of those they serve, keeping a healthy balance between Government oversight and imperfect complex situations abroad.

“Looking back, with the value of hindsight, MMC is a privileged ministry of Grace.”

7th Stage 2016 and beyond...

Father Kevin folded his Mission tent late in 2015. What followed was a period of restructuring and readjusting to the realities of a Society experiencing significant and complex challenges.

But some things we hope will not change: the preservation of the enduring legacy and vision of one man, Lionel Marsden and the spirit of generosity of the first members of the Japanese Marist Mission League and the succeeding generations of friends and donors who from the most unlikely of beginnings have produced such unexpected and extraordinary outcomes.

In 2016 a new Team led by Father Paul Sullivan Executive Officer and ably supported by Anne Martinus, Finance and Mary Cahill, Donations, a competent MMC Advisory Board was appointed and a collaborative agreement with Australian Marist Solidarity (AMS), the overseas development arm of the Marist Brothers, was established.

The team is busy with preparing for the 70th Anniversary of the founding of the Marist Japanese Mission League - a milestone of significant importance - one which we, the Marist Fathers, wish to acknowledge and celebrate with thanksgiving all those who from that night on the 4th April 1949, with such goodness, forgiveness and self-sacrifice have supported this ministry. A ministry graced by Our Mother Mary and in response to her Son's invitation to his disciples to evangelise and be compassionate, caring and generous to the marginalised, the poor, the oppressed and the hungry.

As an epilogue I would like to share a letter received back in August 1990.

Dear Father,

My name is Anne, I am 12 years old. My mother and father receive your Newsletter. I was moved by the loving work done by Christians like myself. I have always taken for granted the many luxuries we have which we take for granted. Because there are seven children in our family, we don't get pocket money. I have saved up \$50.00 from birthday gifts etc. and was going to put this in the bank. I read the touching stories in the Newsletter and realised how much more desperate these people needed it. This was a sacrifice but, my decision was clear when my mother said how much I will forget this, but God won't. I am very pleased to give you this \$50.00. I would especially like this money to help children like those 200 children in Burma.

I am glad I can help you with the wonderful Christian work that you do.

God bless you,

Your new mission supporter

Anne.

My prayer is that many young people like Anne may also be inspired to join us as we continue this unlikely journey into the future with sustaining hope.

Jim Carty sm
March 2019