

Mercy Ships

Here is a story of a trip to the Dominican Republic over Easter this year (2003) by one of our parishioners that will make us think when we tuck into the turkey on Christmas Day.

There were twelve of us. We set out from Heathrow at 7.30 a.m. one day just before Easter. There had been a day's briefing back in February, when most of us had met each other for the first time. It was a very diverse group. Nigel, an accountant in his past life, was our leader. There were two young doctors - Chinese Malay girls - doing their first "house" jobs in Bristol, a drama Adviser, a high powered P.R. chief, and Malcolm came with a valuable qualification as a surveyor. The group included Matthius; he is a barrister and a pharmacist both by the age of 42! Lisa, being a Spanish speaker was worth her weight in gold, Colin and Tina. Margaret is even a little older than me, clocking in at 70!

Now, after all this diversity, you may be wondering what, if anything, we had in common. Well, we had all volunteered to work for MERCY SHIPS. Mercy Ships is manifestly a Christian charity which exists to bring hope and healing to people who have no access to surgery or medical care. The fleet is equipped with stores and medical supplies while in ports around the developed world. There are semi permanent crews on board who see to the day to day running of the ships. Medical staff, who give up all or part of their holiday, fly in and out of the host ports, where the ships spend several months. A team goes ashore to screen and elect the most suitable/needy candidates for surgery. Many people walk long distances to be given a chance of treatment.

Our mother ship was to be the Caribbean Mercy. Here, it may be apposite to explain that we were going to work alongside the ship, rather than on board the vessel itself. In parallel with the eye and dental surgery being done aboard, a Mission Challenge had been issued. The individual members of our party had taken up this challenge. We were to be "attached" to the Caribbean Mercy, at that time moored in Puerto Plata in the Dominican Republic. Some people reading this may have visited this country as a tourist. It will be noted on reference to the atlas that the island of Hispaniola lies between Cuba and South America. The Dominican Republic (DR) makes up roughly two thirds of the island, while Haiti takes up the remaining third. Christopher Columbus attempted to create a permanent settlement there. The Haitian people are some of the poorest in the world. Many of them cross over to the Dominican Republic to find employment. They are often exploited and very poorly paid (no minimum wage or pensions exist for them). They have to purchase a passport, which is prohibitively expensive. Any Haitian child born in the DR does not qualify for a birth certificate unless its parents already possess passports. There is therefore many such refugee children who have no access to education or health care of any sort. In our country, we are so quick to grumble and find fault. What accident of birth put us here and not there?

It is a long flight to the Dominican Republic. Once landed at Santa Domingo airport, we drove across the island to Puerto Plata. We saw coffee plantation and rice fields. There was the occasional street cart loaded with melons and mangoes for sale. As we climbed out of the air-conditioned minibus, the heat hit us as it does when opening a hot oven door. A sympathetic property developer had reduced the cost of our accommodation. It looked luxurious with a swimming pool and in an idyllic setting. Sadly, the plumbing and electricity did not match this picture, our surveyor was incredulous! However, a swim at the end of a very hot day was wonderful and the moving fans kept the bedrooms fairly comfortable.

Now you need to know about the activities of a very good man, Eleo Madonia by

name. A native of Sicily, he emigrated to Canada where he became a successful businessman. About fifteen years ago, he and his wife were on holiday in the Dominican Republic. They took a wrong turning, and found themselves among dwellings of absolute squalor. He felt that no human being should live in such conditions and he made up his mind to do something about it. Now aged 74, he is still working to relieve that poverty. He acquires parcels of land and pays a small band of workers to build new villages. Our team was going to help to build a house in the latest village. Ours was the last of five such teams during the Caribbean Mercy's five months sojourn in Puerto Plata. Generous sponsorship prior to our expedition had enabled building materials for two houses to be purchased; (it costs \$1500 per house). When I say "house" don't think of even "two up & two down". The two room dwellings are constructed of reinforced breezeblocks with concrete floors and a corrugated metal roof, which is mounted on a wooden frame. Each house has a toilet with an individual cesspit.

On that first morning, we boarded our minibus and went to inspect the site. A big blue notice proclaiming, "Ascension Village, funded by Christians from all over the world," was the first sight to greet us. The little church is finished. Our house is number 21, out of a possible 60! There is to be a larger building which will house a small store with rice and beans at cost price, a clinic, and a flat for a caretaker/health worker. The water supply is from natural springs in the hillside above. Each street will have three standpipes. Malcolm was able to design a shower block and clothes washing facility - what luxury!

That afternoon we visited, with Elio, the places from where some of the new residents would be drawn. Oh dear, one has seen T.V. pictures of shantytowns, but to be there and walk around the poor sorry sights is harrowing. In the tropical climate, it often rains very heavily and mud floors were something for which I had not bargained. Everywhere the children followed us and held our hands. There was no begging and we were met with smiles and greetings. Clothes are washed in the rivers, which often flood. Even when garments are worn threadbare, or even absent, time and trouble are spent beading the girls' and young women's hair. Living close to the earth, the children are subject to intestinal worms and we saw a case of rickets.

The American missionary who helps to choose the lucky families, listens for coughs (a symptom of TB), and watches for the swollen tummies, which indicate severe malnutrition. We were sensitive to the situation. We were anxious that the people whom we met did not feel as if they were in a zoo, to be viewed with curiosity.

Another day we took part in a feeding programme, where children are given food supplements twice a week. They had already been allocated stainless steel mugs. Each child was given this mug filled with milk, a hard-boiled egg, and a small bag of vitamin enriched cereal. Margaret had asked the pupils in her Devon village school to donate soft toys; so on that day, each child had a precious toy as well. We all found it a very moving experience.

One day we boarded a truck, and went to give an iced water drink and a meal of rice and beans to people existing on the rubbish dump! We also distributed clothes here which one member of the group had brought from England.

Easter Saturday was a bad day. It rained very hard for most of the morning. Our own labour gang was not working over Easter, so we went to help in the construction of a school in another village. Named Agua Negus (Black Water), it lived up to its name as the floods came up! First, we had to clear rubbish from the ground floor rooms and then I spent time taking the nails out of old, already used pieces of wood, so that they could be hammered flat and used again. Just imagine our chaps doing that! While it rained, we were offered shelter by an old lady who shared the little she had. Over the lunch break, we met the teacher and I gave her the few teaching materials I

had managed to take with me. She is trying to teach 96 children who have no birth certificates. What was so little among so many?

Elio took us to see several of the villages already built. In one of them he had re-routed the river, so that the village would no longer be subject to flooding. Each family has their house on a five-year tenure. If they look after it, it becomes their own after that time. Some people had managed to improve and embellish their house. Small businesses were starting, and all sorts of activities were going on.

One evening we went along to see the showing of a film about Jesus' life. I'm sure our own children would enjoy, and indeed benefit from, exposure to it. The little church was packed to overflowing for such a stimulating experience.

We attended lovely Easter services on board the Caribbean Mercy, and I thought of you all in St. Faith's church singing the same familiar hymns as I was in such different surroundings.

So the twelve days past, and we returned to our land of plenty. We are more grateful for all we have, and yet very frustrated that it is so difficult to share more of it.

Joan Medley