

Zimele East African Immersion Thursday June 25 to Tuesday July 14 2015

Report/Reflection by John Mount

Participants:

Tom Purcell, (Chairperson of Zimele Board, Immersion leader)

John Mount (Zimele Board member, retired teacher- SKC 1981 – 2014, immersion co-leader)

Nick Baff (Teacher St Kevin's)

Joseph Beadell (SKC 2014)

Anne Beadell (mother of Joseph)

Fergal Utri (SKC 2014)

Harry Cross (SKC 2014)

Glen Lopez (SKC 2014)

Xavier Purcell (De La Salle 2014, son of Tom)

Ciaran Shaw (SKC 2014)

Hamish Burrill (SKC 2014)

Conor Walsh (SKC 2012, 2013 Immersion participant)

Alle Guys

Our 2015 immersion participants flew out of Tullamarine on Thursday June 25th on a Qantas flight for Perth, then South African Airways to Johannesburg and Nairobi, arriving at the Sisters of St Joseph in Olepolos, Nairobi, on Friday evening where they were given a warm welcome by Sister Carla and Sister Raffaele. The next morning they visited the Mary Rice Centre in the huge Slum of Kibera in central Nairobi, and, under the supervision of the Director of the Centre, Br Gerald Mgdalala, and Br Peter Cole, they helped run an Edmund Rice camp for the young people who live in Kibera, one of Nairobi's biggest slums, with a population of about one million people. This proved a powerful experience for the group and, being so early in the immersion, a confronting but nevertheless most rewarding one for the participants. In the evening, Peter Shanahan, Principal of the Br Beausang School, and the other Brothers in residence hosted the participants for dinner at the Brothers house in Vet. (for those unfamiliar with this area of Nairobi, as you travel west out of the Nairobi CBD, you pass the huge slum of Kibera on your right, then a further 12 kilometres or so you come to the popular shopping centre of Karen which has a large supermarket, a host of touristy shops and cafes and restaurants, and a bank and post office. Another eight or so kilometres and you arrive at the suburb of Embul-Bul, and the Br Beausang school; only another kilometre and you arrive in Vet which has a smaller supermarket, many rather dilapidated shops, and a pub. The Brothers' house is in Vet. At the back of Vet, as you walk south from the main road you come to the area called Olepolos, which is where the Sisters of St Joseph have their convent. If you keep moving west along the main road from Vet, about five more kilometres, you come across the rather thriving busy, crowded, very poor area of Gngong.)

On Sunday June 28, the participants attended the mass at the newly constructed church at Olepolos. As I have said in all my reports of these immersions, the masses in East Africa are special, great singing and dancing and great faith. After the mass, the group went to Eva's place, only a kilometre away for lunch. Eva is Principal of the Primary School at Br. Beausang. She is a great friend and Tommy and I always look forward to catching up with Eva and her nuclear and extended family each year. This is a great day. We all share a terrific meal and in true African style are entertained by members of the family and introduced formally to them all. Each one steps forward and introduces him/herself. We then reciprocate. This is what the immersion is all about- you'd never have these experiences on a tourist experience. This is immersion at its best. Mixing with our friends, sharing our stories and singing our songs.

On Monday, June 29 and Tuesday 30th June, the group spent the whole day at the Br Beausang school where they observed classes, took classes and played with the students at break. Peter Shanahan is the Headmaster, Eva Head mistress of the Primary school, Sister Francesca, pastoral assistant, and a staff of about 30 teachers. Also at the school were two very impressive young Melbourne helpers, Annika and Bryce. Our great friends Agatha and Carol also assist in pastoral work at the school. Zimele's journalist in Kenya, Robert Rawui, is thankfully now employed at the school and does a marvellous job sending back to Melbourne reports on families needing help. At the end of each day our immersion group assisted with sports training in preparation for the sporting cultural exchange to take place in Arusha, Tanzania, on Mon and Tues July 6/7. On Tuesday the group were taken on home visits in the Embul-Bul area which, as I've said before, is a very poor area, and the group found these visits both confronting and, in their own way, quite inspiring in terms of the resilience of the human spirit so evident in the residents into whose homes they had been invited. It was on that very evening that Xavier Purcell and I joined the immersion group. My son John Paul had been ordained a priest of the Melbourne Archdiocese on the previous Saturday June 29th and Xavier had examination commitments. Xavier and I met the group, including Tommy, Agatha, Eva and Osema (a teacher and Community Development officer at Beausang) at the Vet pub. It was great to catch up with them all and find out what they had been doing over the past few days.

On Wednesday July 1, Tom, Robert Rawui, myself and the group all travelled in Stanley's 20 seater to Eldoret, a good sized city about 250 kms north west of Nairobi, where the Christian Brothers were assisting in the running of the Education for Life Centre there, which caters for over 300 mainly women with HIV and their children. We travelled through central Kenya astride the Great Rift Valley, through the bustling city of Makuru, past many small settlements along the way, with dilapidated market stalls brimming with people, hundreds of donkey drawn carts, little children waving to us as we passed, men lying around sleeping on the side of the road, or in groups talking, doing nothing in particular, cattle, sheep with herdsmen caring for them, hundreds of semi-trailers, roads in need of repair peppered with annoying speed bumps, litter by the side of roads, visible tangible poverty, and vendors on the roads selling sugar cane. Eventually we made it to Eldoret, a large city with awful traffic problems and found our way to the St John the Baptist Pastoral centre where we were staying for the next three nights. The head nun at the centre is Sister Edwina. When we arrived we were greeted by Br Bill, a Canadian Christian Brother and two young Kenyans who help out at the EFL centre, Mark and Bernard Kipchong.

Now, before I go any further, let me explain that this area has special significance for our inspiring leader, Tommy Purcell. You see, Tommy is an athlete, as are his children, and he has a particular passion for athletics. And the home of the champion Kenyan long and middle distance runners is a mere thirty kilometres outside Eldoret at St Patrick's College, in the beautiful little township of Iten. So each morning we were in Eldoret, Tommy and a few other keen runners in the immersion group

would get Stanley to drive them to Iten, and they would go running with the Kenyans! Tommy said the experience was, to use a Bruce McAvaney expression, 'very special', not only in terms of the thrill of actually running with the Kenyans, but doing so on the edge of the Great Rift Valley, in such a spectacular landscape with breathtaking views. So on this first morning in Eldoret, on Thursday July 2, the runners returned and were soon informed that the Archbishop of Eldoret, Bishop Cornelius, was visiting us at the pastoral centre to welcome us and thank us for our support of the EFL Centre. The Bishop is a gentle, intelligent, amiable fellow who was so welcoming and appreciative of the work we are doing at the centre, which is actually a diocesan outreach ministry. The bishop expressed his love for Australia and intimated that he could well be visiting us in the new year. He pointed out that the diocese of Broome in WA currently has five Kenyan priests working in the diocese. He went on to explain that he has recently been working hard to act as a mediator between the warring, often violent tribal groups in Northern Kenya. He mentioned one meeting in which the tribal leaders put down their AK 47's and sat around the table. As my son was ordained a priest in Melbourne two weeks ago, I asked the Bishop whether there was a seminary in Eldoret and how many seminarians were studying for the priesthood. He said indeed there was a seminary and that there were 50 seminarians in the Eldoret Diocese. He also said there were between 200 and 300 seminarians in the seminaries in Kenya. There is no shortage of vocations to the priesthood in Kenya. After the talk by the bishop, we went by bus to the centre where we were given an unbelievable welcome by the mothers at the centre. They greeted us on the street outside and accompanied us in dance and song inside the centre where the celebrations continued for at least thirty minutes. In the introductions and talks that followed, it was clear to us all that they see us as their saviours, that the centre gives them hope and takes away the terrible stigma associated with HIV in the community. The centre is a Diocesan ministry and is administered by Angie Obuto with assistants in Brothers Silverio, a Kenyan, and Br Bill Colford, a Canadian. We collected the rosary beads and other beads the mothers make at the centre. Before we leave for Johannesburg on Friday July 10, we needed to distribute the beads among the participants and bring them back to Australia to raise money for the centre. This was a tricky operation but one which we managed quite successfully.

In the afternoon we went on home visits. Lillian, one of the mothers at the centre escorted Br Bill, Elle and me on six home visits. Each 'home' was little more than a small tin shed. We struggled to fit into these shacks but were offered a seat on a dilapidated couch or chair and asked the women questions about their lives. No electricity, no light, quite dark, no kitchen, no running water, let alone hot water. We visited Margaret, Grace, Peres, Raelqueen, Peres Muthoni and Lillian's own home. All have HIV and are on a strict medical regimen requiring food with their medication. They have to pay about 1000 Kenyan shillings per month, or about A\$15 in rent. It is a real struggle for all of them. They earn what little they take in by selling charcoal, and fruit which they buy at local markets and sell at a meagre profit. Some of them manage to do a little domestic work. They all expressed their gratitude to the centre for giving them hope and for helping them cope with the stigma of HIV, which is their biggest cross as it destroys their self-esteem and self-belief. The stigma associated with HIV is very strong in the community. Br Bill encapsulated what Elle and I were feeling when he expressed his great admiration for the mothers and wondered at the strength and resilience of the human spirit so powerfully exemplified in the mothers' daily struggle to survive in such a vulnerable and fragile environment. On Friday July 3 we assembled at the EFL centre and were given a marvellous farewell by Angie, Br Silverio and Br Bill. Tommy and I were given African shirts as a gift accompanied by song and dance. It was really very special. We then all shared lunch together and were farewelled by the mothers. Stanley then drove us all to St Patrick's College, Iten, some thirty kilometres out of Eldoret on the edge of the Great Rift Valley. There we were given a tour of the college and met Br Colm O'Connell, the coach of the champion Kenyan athletes, who

gave us an inspiring talk on his coaching philosophy and his relationship with the athletes. We then saw a film of David Rudisha's victory in the 2012 London Olympics in the 800 metres in a world record time of one minute and forty seconds. David was declared athlete of the Olympics on that performance. We then retired for drinks at the Iten Hotel which gave us spectacular views of the Great Rift Valley. Then back to the Pastoral Centre and next day, back to Nairobi.

On Sunday July 5th we attended mass at Olepolos and then travelled across the border into Tanzania and booked into our lodgings at Edmund Rice Sinon College in Arusha, a large bustling, vibrant city just west of Mt Kilimanjaro, at the foot of Tanzania's second highest mountain, Mount Meru. We were greeted by Br Clem Barrett, the Registrar at the College and a good friend of Tommy's and mine. Clem is an Old Paradian. He was one year in front of me at Parade, the same class as my brother Jim. The Headmaster, Br Daniel, was away at a conference and was not returning till the Wednesday. The college provides three meals a day for all students, including the 600 boarders the college accommodates, so it is a massive operation. Monday July 6th and Tuesday July 7th were very special days, as it was on these two days that the Br Beausang/Sinon college sporting and Cultural exchange took place. On Monday morning we were all given a tour of the college and then visited the Kesho Leo Children's Village which was about four kms from the college; the village looks after vulnerable women and children and is eco friendly and almost completely self sustainable. After this interesting insight, the sporting exchange was about to begin in the afternoon after lunch. Tommy had once again arranged through the continued generosity of John-Paul Whitbread and Whitbread Insurance for each member of the Kenyan and Tanzanian parties to have and keep a specially designed Guernsey in the colours of their respective countries. They looked spectacular and the students were so proud of them. It soon became clear to us all that in this exchange, national pride was at stake and the games were fiercely contested. And what made the exchange special this year was that each contest was scheduled separately and at Sinon college itself, so that at each contest, the girls and boys volleyball, the girls netball, the boys' basketball, the whole cohort could watch each game and cheer on their team. As a result, the atmosphere at all games was exciting and at times electrifying. Supporters from both sides often engaged in singing and dancing as they cheered on their players. It really was something special. And the AFL match, the only one played off campus was just as exciting. This year we expanded the exchange to include a debate which took place at the college on the Monday and was, to say the least, very entertaining. Tommy needs to be congratulated on initiating and organising this exchange which is an invaluable opportunity for young Kenyans and Tanzanians to cross their borders, make new friends, experience another culture and share their faith.

On the Tuesday July 7th, after being farewelled by Br Clem and the exchange participants who were preparing for a social which was celebrated with typical African energy in song and dance, we left the college and booked into the Saruni River Lodge for the next two nights. On Wednesday we all went on Safari, to Tarrangiri National Park. We were particularly fortunate in visiting the park when most of the main animals were on display. Apart from the predictable wilderbeast, zebras, impalas, water buck, ostriches, elephants, baboons, we were fortunate enough to come across a particularly impressive group of giraffes, about thirty of them crossing the road in front of us, and just when we thought we'd missed seeing lions, we came across a male and female lion in the act of mating. Pretty special. Then we spotted a cheetah and later a leopard. So the safari was a great success. The next day we travelled back to the convent in Nairobi where we were given a beautiful farewell in Song by Sister Carla, Sister Raffaele and the nuns and postulants at the Olepolos convent. On behalf of the group, I returned the favour with a rather croaky rendition of Nat King Cole's 'Love is a Many Splendoured Thing'. Another highlight-very special! That evening was a busy one as we were

leaving for the airport at 5.30 a.m. and had to distribute all the beads from Eldoret among the group so that we could successfully get them to Johannesburg and later, to Australia.

We rose at 5.30 a.m. on Friday July 10 and Stanley drove us to the Nairobi Airport where we took a SA airways flight to Johannesburg which arrived at 12 noon. We were greeted by our good friend, Emmanuel, a young Nigerian working in ministry at the Holy Family College in central Johannesburg, and who still harbours a desire to study for the priesthood. A most generous big hearted young man. Emmanuel greeted the group and led us to two brand new Toyota vans which would be our transport for the next four days. He drove us to our lodgings in the Anglican retreat centre in Rosettenville, about 10 kms south west of the CBD. As had been explained clearly in our preparation sessions for the immersion, our main focus in Johannesburg was not so much visiting ministries, as we did in Kenya and Tanzania, but learning more about the South Africans' struggle for freedom from the oppressive white supremacist, Afrikaaner Government and its discriminatory social segregation policy popularly known as 'apartheid', the freeing of Nelson Mandela, the coming of free elections, with one man one vote, and Mandela's eventual election as President of the Republic in 1994. Our whole focus was to be on the themes of reconciliation and forgiveness. These themes are central to our Christian faith and sadly lacking in our troubled, conflict ridden world, aren't they? If only more people were willing to forgive, much of the world's divisiveness and intolerance would struggle to survive. On the Friday afternoon, therefore, we travelled to Soweto, the district which is really the sacred ground of the struggle, because it was in this South-West Township, from which Soweto derives its name, that a young thirteen year old Hector Pieterse was shot dead by police on June 16, 1976, when students from a number of neighbouring schools decided to hold a peaceful demonstration against the Government's recent decision that all instruction in schools was to be given in the Afrikaans language, a language that most students were not familiar with. The students kept the demonstration secret, even parents weren't told. The photo of a young African man, Mbuyisa Makhubu, running with Hector's dead body in his arms, and Hector's sister, Antoinette, running with them, has become the symbol of the freedom struggle. Antoinette never saw Makhubu again. What began as a peaceful demonstration soon became a violent struggle for survival when police began to open fire, with tear gas and live bullets. Things deteriorated until there was open rebellion, looting, destroying properties. The looters accidentally killed a doctor who ironically had spent his life working for the black South Africans but who was mistaken for a government official. This in turn led to increased police retaliation and the next day over a hundred activists were killed. By November 30th, seven hundred students and activists were in detention. News of Hector's death and the violence that erupted spread world-wide. Hector Pieterse soon became the symbol of the plight of South African youth under the yoke of apartheid. On this Friday afternoon our group visited the Hector Pieterse Museum which stands in the middle of Soweto, on the very site that Hector was killed. The museum is an impressive record of the Soweto riots and also features the life and work of a young student activist Steve Biko, who had, for most of his student life, been active in promoting black consciousness and trying to convince black Africans that they were equal to the white man and deserved to be treated as such. He had set up an organisation he named 'Zimele' which is Zulu for 'Stand on your own feet'. It included a co-operative and meeting centres for black South Africans to support each other and boost each other's self-esteem. Biko was later arrested, tortured and died as a result of being thrown half dead in the back of a police van and driven hundreds of kilometres from Cape Town to Pretoria. His story is told in the well-known film, 'Cry Freedom', starring Denzil Washington as Biko. Steve Biko was Tommy's inspiration to set up the outreach ministry we now support and are committed to, Zimele, named by Tom in memory of Biko.

On Saturday July 11 we visited the Apartheid Museum which gives visitors the opportunity to experience in dramatic fashion what it would have been like to have lived in such a patronising,

discriminatory and humiliating system where everyone was classified according to colour and had to possess and produce his/her personal identity pass wherever he/she went. On entry to the museum, you are given a card which identifies you as either white or Black, and you are then directed accordingly through a range of experiences relevant to that classification. It was quite confronting. The rest of the museum took one through the whole history of South Africa, focussing particularly and powerfully on Mandela's life, his imprisonment on Robben Island, his release, his election as President. It is a very impressive history, meticulously researched and brilliantly presented. After the museum, we lunched in Soweto and, in the afternoon, for a break from what had been a rather intense schedule with plenty of reading and thinking to do, we went to the Turffontein Race track, also in Rosettenville and had a fun day trying to catch a winner.

Sunday July 12 was pretty special. On past immersions we would attend mass at Holy Rosary church in Phiri, Soweto, but this year, for a change, we attended mass, again in Soweto, but at St Martin de Porres' church. The mass was celebrated by the parish priest, an impressive young white South African, Fr Botha. Again, I know this sounds like a broken record, but the singing was sensational, out of this world. I'd fly to Johannesburg tomorrow just to witness such a mass. After the mass, we chatted with Fr Botha who explained the history of the church. And after the mass we drove to the main informal settlement in Soweto (a euphemism for a 'slum') and visited Madonna and her two beautiful daughters who sang for us. It was very special. Tommy is helping Madonna and the girls with their education and we try to visit them every year. They really love us coming and give us a beautiful welcome. Madonna's mother, the girls' grandmother, Rudo, lives with them. They are Catholics and Rudo is full of faith and a wonderful model for the girls, as is Madonna. They say the rosary each day and attend Sunday mass at Phiri. Their faith gives them hope and helps them survive in what are pretty tough conditions. They are a beautiful, happy family. Oh, before we came to their house we walked through the slum and came across a soccer match on a very poor excuse for a pitch but which had attracted a huge crowd and was played with great enthusiasm. It wasn't long before a gentleman approached us, probably wondering who we were—they would rarely see whites in such an environment in Soweto—it can be a dangerous place. But he was so pleased to see us and taken by our interest in the match. He was a community leader and discussed with us ways of contributing to the general wellbeing of the community. He said he'd love to organise some kind of soccer match in the future between an Aussie team and a Soweto team. What an opportunity to contribute something to this desperately poor community! There is such need in Africa. We can do so much. Perhaps Zimele may be able to organise something in the future. Who knows. This gentleman pointed to a number of houses, or rather shacks, that had been pulled down and their residents moved to cheap but permanent, better government housing we could see in the distance and he said his aim was one day to move everyone out of the slum. We left him with our best wishes. What a task!

Monday July 13 was to be our last day in Johannesburg, our last day in Africa. In the morning we had arranged to play Holy Family College a game of basketball. Their team were dressed and out on the court practising when we arrived. They looked very good and we didn't know what to expect. We had one very good basketballer in our group, a few good footballers, the rest so-so reasonable sportsmen. We could have been humiliated, but it was not to be. Thanks to a magnificent solo performance by Harry Cross, and some solid support from Fergal, Xavier, Hamish, Ciaran, and Joseph we managed to win the game—a real highlight as it was so unexpected. After the game, Emmanuel drove us all to the Oliver Tambo Airport for our flight back to Perth and Melbourne.

The 2015 immersion was unforgettable. In this report I have not included the insights and observations of individual members of the group, but, when we did meet at the end of most days and shared our experiences, we were privileged to hear some amazing responses, reactions and insights from the group. It never ceases amaze me how well each immersion has managed to be a happy, harmonious experience with very few, if any, difficulties, and this one was no exception. Tommy and I are so grateful to every participant for being so easy to share this wonderful experience with. And it's not an easy experience. It can be quite confronting and at times emotionally exhausting but each member of the group coped really well and gained much from the experience. Very few, if any, return to Melbourne unmoved. It can be quite a life-changing experience. As is evident from this report or reflection, the programme is pretty full and rarely does a day go by without some incredible highlight that is impossible to capture in a report such as this, but I sincerely hope this has given you some kind of glimpse into the experience.

The Zimele immersion is an important part of the Zimele mission and outreach, as it forges an invaluable personal connection between our fund raising work back here in Australia and the people we are reaching out to in East Africa. The key word that keeps jumping out at me after, now, seven immersions is 'gratitude'; the gratitude I personally feel for having been given the opportunity to help Tommy lead these immersions, to meet, live with, listen to and share experiences with the marvellous young men and women who have travelled with us, and to walk with our brothers and sisters in East Africa, many of whom Tommy and I can happily and thankfully call our friends; and the gratitude our friends in Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa express to us every time we visit them for simply remembering them, walking with them, sharing their hopes and dreams and disappointments, and for caring, and expressing that caring in a practical and tangible way.

If, having read this report you feel you may wish to come on a future immersion, feel free to contact Tom Purcell at purcellt@trinity.vic.edu.au or me at johnmount44@gmail.com. The cost is about \$4500. But you really do need to be sure that it is an experience you wish to have, and that you can cope with some of the hardships that inevitably come your way during such an experience. You also need to be prepared to commit to Zimele on an ongoing basis, and be prepared to keep the fires burning when you return. It is not meant to be a tourist experience. We need to think seriously about our motives. We should be going not so much for shallow reasons, such as 'it seems like an exciting experience', but rather for serious motives, some of which may be a little selfish-it promises to be a growth experience for me, I hope to come home a better person, but hopefully a little more altruistic, in that you want to go out of a sincere wish to walk with and reach out to our less privileged brothers and sisters in East Africa, and to help them in a practical, tangible way to become better equipped to improve the quality of their lives, to help them 'Zimele'-to 'stand on their own feet.'

JOHN MOUNT

Zimele Board member, retired teacher- SKC 1981 – 2014, immersion co-leader