

At a recent monthly meeting of the OLF Caring Support Group, a presentation was given by Madeleine Gough – a representative of the organisation of Mary MacKillop Today. Members of the Caring Support Group make a small donation each year to this charity and hence it was thought fitting to find out a little more about Mary MacKillop Today and its works.

The following is an excerpt from the minutes prepared by Agnes Simiana outlining the presentation given by Madeleine. It is a reminder during the Lenten season that generosity by way of almsgiving has a profound effect in changing people's lives and offering hope.

Talk by Madeline Gough, Coordinator at Mary Mackillop Today – At about 10.15 a.m., Madeline Gough joined the meeting. Teresa welcomed Madeline to the meeting and thanked her for making herself available to address the Group. In turn, Madeline thanked the Group for having her and for being so generous towards the works undertaken by Mary Mackillop Today. Teresa then invited Madeline to commence her presentation.

Madeline started by saying that Mary Mackillop Today (MMT) was primarily focused on the education, in its broadest sense, of the poor, the marginalised and the most vulnerable in our community, both here in Australia and overseas. The aim was to make all projects sustainable and to ensure the flow-on effects within the community at large. It works in partnership with local groups and empowers the locals to try and reach their full potential.

In Australia, MMT was greatly involved with providing scholarships to people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The scheme entitled "First Nations Tertiary Scholarships Program" aims to provide the opportunity to First Nations people to pursue tertiary studies while at the same time helping them with their living expenses. Another project carried out by MMT in Australia was the provision of no-interest loans to people who needed such things as white goods, medical equipment etc but were unable to afford it. These loans steered people away from getting into financial problems. Community grants given by MMT were also instrumental in helping community-based organisations to support the most marginalised and vulnerable in our community.

In Timor Leste, a young nation still suffering from years of conflict and destabilisation, the focus was on both education and health. MMT provides teacher-training courses and equips teachers with the resources, skills and knowledge needed to ensure children receive a proper education. A mobile learning unit, using varied teaching methods, also ensures that children in the very rural parts of the country, as well as those in orphanages and the disabled, are given access to at least a basic education. As far as health is concerned, MMT has introduced courses for teachers to help them understand the various health challenges and thus enable them to convey vital health information to their students. Health information courses are also provided to parents and community members.

In Papua New Guinea the focus was on people with a disability. MMT has organised, with the local community, Management Plans to assess the needs of the disabled and to organise the support they require. Courses in sign-language have been introduced and workshops have been organised for volunteers etc to build their understanding of disability and of the rights of people with a disability.

In Peru MMT is very involved in encouraging women to produce local handicrafts, clothes etc to be sold overseas. Through “Ethica”, which is a fair-trade organisation set up by MMT here in Australia, these Peruvian women are able to export their products to Australia and to make a living out of the proceeds of sale. The income they generate not only makes them self-sufficient but helps their families and their wider community to improve their standard of living. MMT is also instrumental in conducting workshops on conflict resolution, domestic violence, the stigma of disability etc to equip women with the skills to handle these issues.

In Fiji traditional structures, especially in rural areas, still do not allow women to play an active role in the community. MMT conducts leadership programmes for young women to empower them to promote change within their community and to give them a voice in decision making. With the onset of climate change and resultant rising water levels, some Fijians have been forced to flee their homes and to move inland, especially around Suva. The areas around Suva are also home to people who leave rural areas and try and find work around the city. Once again MMT has stepped in to provide this transient population with a mobile learning unit for the “displaced” children.

Questions were then taken by Madeline. One of them referred to funding and Madeline pointed out that MMT depended on donations, grants, collection of stamps etc. However, MMT had also received DFAT accreditation and hence was able to receive funding under the Australian NGO Cooperation Program. This, in itself, was an acknowledgment of the very high standard maintained by MMT in its projects.

Teresa then thanked Madeline for her very interesting and informative talk and commended MMT for the wonderful work they carry out.

A special thanks to the many parishioners who have saved used stamps for MMT over several years. Please continue to deposit your stamps in the box in the foyer as this all helps fund MMT.