

Editorial

In lieu of an editorial for this edition I offer this report from the practice exchanges associated with the World Community Development Conference held this year in Maynooth, Ireland. Gavin, our editor, has been globetrotting and escaping the worst of our winter.

What is a practice exchange?

I participated in my first International Association for Community Development IACD practice exchange in India in 2015 and reported this to an earlier volume of *Whanake*. A practice exchange is a tour by community development enthusiasts, led by local community development workers. An IACD practice exchange, as the name might suggest, involves people from all around the world coming together to participate in local community development initiatives under the guidance of local community development leaders. You might call it travel with meaning, or a classroom on the move.

The first practice exchange I went on this year was to Dublin and a 'classroom on the move' is an apt description – a group of us were dispatched to various community development initiatives in Dublin city via tour-bus. I was fortunate enough to visit the Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre (www.paveepoint.ie). Irish travellers have been a feature of Irish life for many centuries but have only recently had their rights and ethnicity recognised by the Irish state. Visiting the Pavee Point Centre was a rich intercultural experience. In an open hall surrounded by incredibly poignant photographs and artefacts we were taught by leaders of the Travellers community about their history and modern-day existence. In this I learnt that although I had come halfway around the world I was one of the settled people. For Travellers there are only Travellers or settled people. The centre is devoted to the preservation of Traveller culture and the ongoing fight for Traveller rights.

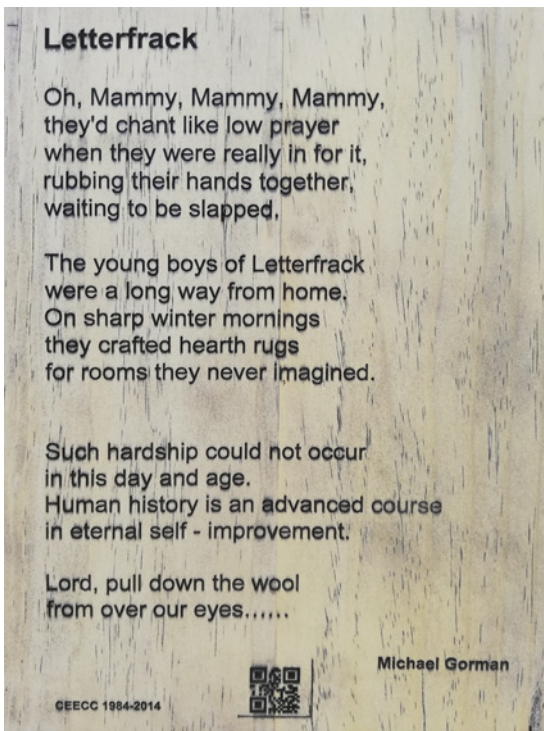
The second stop was the Fatima Groups United community-development organisation. This was gritty urbanism and the people rising up at its best. The Fatima Family Resource Centre (www.fgu.ie) has a proud history of success in rebuilding a community which had been devastated by poverty and drug abuse. The centre has provided the focal point to create real government of the people by the people for the people and has initiatives in education, health and social services, boasting sports teams, a café and childcare centre. It was fabulous to see really solid community-development principles in action. Organisers realised that the social isolation of modern urban high-rise developments was the problem they needed to deal with most, and have successfully engaged a community to take control of its own future.

The independent Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (www.ihrec.ie) was also an inspirational visit. Ireland is the only country in Europe that has a smaller population today than it had in the 1800s. This can be fairly pinned to the oppression experienced in this divided nation, violent conflict, and the enormous toll of the Irish potato famine. One response to this has been an enormously generous approach to new migrants and refugees, with almost one million new arrivals in the last 20 years. The commission is a proactive response to building an inclusive culture based on equality and human rights, and right on target in its community-development practice; and it is, as a result, a very busy organisation. The quality of some of the resource materials being produced was outstanding, and it was heartening to see so many young people of multiple ethnicities driving the organisation forward.

My indulgent second practice exchange was the wild Atlantic Way tour. This took us from Maynooth through the Irish countryside to visit some rural community-development initiatives, before the city of Galway and ultimately the Aran Islands. Deep in the countryside of Connemara we came to Letterfrack, a small country village where education had been contested on religious grounds for many years. We visited the former industrial school buildings and looked at a range of initiatives which arose to keep the community together following the closure of this notorious school. A community radio station, much like the one in my own community of Waiheke Island, in Auckland's Hauraki Gulf, a gallery and a renowned furniture making and design enterprise sit in austere stone buildings in the pretty countryside. A solitary stone plaque spoke of the dark past.

A small youth centre in a rural country town bore great similarity to projects in our own community in New Zealand: here too was the problem of access for rural youth, where little public transport exists, a lack of facilities for young people with low population density, and the ever-present fear for parents that children will migrate to the cities and never come back. I was struck by the similarities in programmes and problems in what could be a sister organisation operating in Wellsford, New Zealand.

As an island-dweller myself, the jewel in the crown of my travelling had to be the visit to the Aran Islands. We stayed on Inis Oirr, the smallest of the islands (population 250, three pubs). In the midst of an Irish heat wave and drought we sunbathed on the beach during our break and followed our Irish cousins diving into the Atlantic Sea. I may at some future date forgive my practice exchange colleague Huston Gibson for egging me on. Honestly, I thought my heart would stop it was so cold, but families were having a fabulous time enjoying what must be in this climate a very rare treat. The island is managed without police by a community committee and has several fabulous public facilities. In addition to the ruins of a 15th-century castle and a 3rd-century church



there is a great community centre, a community-owned and operated cinema, and a fascinating art and craft gallery. The place was hauntingly beautiful and the people very generous with their conversation. The ferries, which are relatively frequent during the short tourist season, are quite small boats, and I could not help but imagine how the island might cope if some of the large, fast catamarans which visit Waiheke were to disgorge their load of tourists – they would easily outnumber the resident islanders.

The harshness of the existence in that climate is extraordinary. There is no natural soil and it is built up by islanders gathering seaweed which is dug into sand in tiny paddocks surrounded by stone walls to stop the wind erosion. The traditional boats or currachs are tiny lattices of timber covered with animal hides – fishing and farming were hazardous existences. Community development was everywhere, the collective spirit and way of understanding generated by such a harsh climate continues to influence the development and preservation of the island.

If you ever have an opportunity to do an IACD practice exchange I thoroughly recommend it. You will make friends for life and have a real refresh of your CD perspective. Paul LaChappel, IACD president, and practice exchange junkie has just returned from a practice exchange in Bali and reported extensively on the IACD Facebook page (www.facebook.com/IACDglobal). Further exchanges are planned for Scotland, and possibly Mexico, next year.

John Stansfield





