

A DIARY EXTENSIONS TO HUONG PHUONG VILLAGE ORPHANAGE

ASSISTANCE TO THE ORPHANAGE AND CONVENT DURING EASTER 2011

The question of how to improve life on the ground at the orphanage is not a simple one. Sponsorship is scattered across many sources and there is no transparency about these. I am not very religious, but took the approach that practical aspects of physical comfort and health are inextricably linked with the spiritual life of the convent and orphanage.

Some people at the orphanage can attend school and have a sunny disposition. Others are severely brain-damaged and depressing to see. The orphanage is not always a happy place. Some people have to be hand fed, hand washed, bedded and taken to the toilet. This is thankless, challenging and unseen work. Several nuns who have taken their final vows are permanent staff at the orphanage. Other young sisters from the convent are rotated in approximately 3-month shifts for this challenging work.



Thuong being fed by Sister Loi.



Sister Loi feeds a small child.



Sister Loi is young and bright. She has been posted to work a three month rotation at the orphanage.



The orphanage is not always a happy place. Working with the poor at the orphanage demands personal sacrifice.



Sister Lan cools a new baby with a fan.



Left to right: Mother Superior Sister Hoa, Na, --, Phi, Hue.

During my visit to the orphanage in Easter 2011, I took the approach that the first way of helping the orphanage was not to build edifices (the project that I was invited to volunteer for), but to try to improve conditions for education, general health, comfort and time efficiency of the women and orphanage residents. With these aims in mind, a few projects for assistance to the orphanage and convent were completed, and some more were planned. They are described below.

LAUNDRY MACHINES FOR THE CONVENT.

A large towel for each of the 130 women in the convent community had been purchased during Christmas. The community of 40 women at the Huong Phuong mother house needed laundry machines. This frees up some of their time, and allows more laundry to be washed.

I had suggested at Christmas time that some washing machines would be really useful. At that time the idea was greeted with a negative shake of the head and short “Khong!” Sister Huong had rationalised this with an explanation that the sisters’ vow of poverty prevented the use of mechanisation for washing. At the time, I argued the point with her.

Now, 3 months later, Sister Tuyen and Sister Huong were with me at the Ba don shops, doing a lot of agonising over brand names, specifications and pricing. They gently but persistently interrogated the shop sales people. Was this machine good? Why is this one more expensive? Where was this machine made? (I suggested that they basically all come from China, Korea and Taiwan and have arbitrary brand names stamped on them). They spent half a day making comparative runs between the only two shops at Ba don that sell laundry machines.

In the end, they were convinced that the more famous brand name is “better”, because it is more expensive and has more computer-like programs. This unfortunately is typical of the Vietnamese villager’s view of technology. The more elaborate and expensive the electronics, the better it must be. The more you paid for a consumer item, the better it must be. The more you paid for an unnecessary church building with unnecessary decoration, the better it must be. This kind of ill-informed consumer view is one of the local factors that perpetuate economic poverty.

I tried to explain that a basic design 25-year old reconditioned machine with a new motor and belts, one knob and no electronic pad buttons might be more reliable. Such a concept is alien to them. In the end, though, the sisters got what they wanted. Incredibly to me, both machines were transported on the back of a motor scooter. The sisters were immensely pleased with the purchase. It related directly to their health, time management, hygiene and comfort.



Laundry machine perched on a motor scooter at the shop for delivery to the convent.

COMPUTER ROOM UPGRADE FOR THE ORPHANAGE.

A room with insufficient electric light had been set aside for a computer at the orphanage. School students and Zhang, the self-educated boy in a wheelchair, had been using a very old computer with out internet capability.

A new computer, printer, speaker system, webcam, games and USB internet were installed. The multi-skilled bicycle workshop owner from whom we had purchased 6 new bicycles also turned out to be the sisters' computer expert. He installed and tested the computer, changing the operating system at my request.

Internet provides a research facility for the 4 school students at the orphanage. It should provide additional activities for the 2 self-educated wheelchair boys. It will also potentially enable the three deaf and dumb women (all in their mid-twenties) to learn some sign language. For the deaf and dumb, web cam might make sign language communication possible with people in other countries.

It was so wonderful to see one deaf and dumb girl's reaction when she sighted sign language for the first time on the internet. Her face lit up with the joy of discovery and instant comprehension. She instantly started practising the signs. It affected me to be privileged to be present at such a break-through moment and I had to hold back the tears.

Fluorescent lights were installed in the room and broken computer parts were removed to a recycling workshop.



Vietnam post delivering the new computers and printers to the convent.



*Left to right: Sang, Huong, Danh, Hang, Oanh, Tram.
Dang is wheelchair bound and self-educated in reading, writing and computer use.*



Left to right: Nam, Na, Oanh. These two deaf and dumb women have never been taught a conventional sign language. For the first time, they will be able to learn Vietnamese sign language via the internet.

COMPUTER ROOM UPGRADE FOR THE CONVENT.

A room with insufficient electric light or ventilation had been set aside at the convent, with one computer and one laptop for the senior sisters' use only. Due to this insufficient computer provision, the younger sisters had been excluded from computer and internet access. Two internet computers with web cams, speaker system and printer were installed specifically for the use of the younger sisters.

The young sisters (ages 18 to 25) are specifically the group who had been banned from computer use by the older sisters, and who would most benefit from education in computer use. Basic training in computer use was organised with the computer installer and with Sister Tuyen, one of the people authorised to use the computers.

The computers will provide a facility to write and print out documents, research, email and potentially communicate by Skype with sisters studying or working in other communities and overseas. New power points, wall mounted fans and fluorescent lights were installed in this room, and the old ceiling fan removed for later reuse.



Sister Tuyen at the new convent computers.

ADDITIONAL LIGHTS FOR THE CONVENT KITCHEN.

The kitchen area in Vietnamese houses usually reflects the low status of women. It is usually somewhere out the back; poorly lit; pitch black; smoke-filled and usually equipped with old or mended implements.

In western countries the kitchen is by contrast the gleaming showpiece at the centre of the house. It often almost always the room featured in photographs of luxury houses. It often is a key feature of a western couple's decision to purchase a house.

When I suggested new fluorescent lighting for the food preparation and wash-up area of the convent, the idea was greeted with general disbelief and incomprehension. I explained that chopping meat, gutting fish and stripping feathers off chickens at 3am (which I have watched the Sisters doing) requires better lighting. The lighting should be at least as good as the lighting for guests in the showpiece dining room. Just as the village bicycle shop owner was the computer adviser, the convent's next door farmer turned out to be their electrician. Of course as soon as ("un-necessary") lights were installed in the kitchen, they became regarded as "normal".

COMPLETION OF BICYCLE FLEET FOR THE ORPHANAGE.

When I had first asked about the usefulness of additional bicycles for the orphanage, it was suggested that there were enough and they could borrow some if needed. When the number of people who travelled by bicycle to school or church were counted, there turned out to be 14 bicycle riders. Six new bicycles were needed to complete the fleet and were purchased from donated funds.



Left to right: Lieu, Huyen, Hoa, Mai, Linh, Oanh, Nam.



Left to right: Lieu, Huyen, Hoa, Mai, Linh, Oanh, Nam.



Left to right: Linh, Oanh, Nam.

MARY OF LA VANG STATUE FOR ORPHANAGE CHAPEL

For my mother's birthday, with my brother and sister sharing costs, I purchased a statue of Mary of La Vang with a carved dedication for the orphanage chapel.

The statue came from the Thien An monastery shop at Hue. Mary travelled in the back seat of a taxi back to the hotel where I was staying and then to the bus station. On the bus, Mary was given a prominent seat. She was even charged an additional fare as a full passenger. The driver, however, agreed to drop us off at the convent gates.

I carried Mary off the bus and planted her in the dining room, to the delight of the sisters. The dedication reads: PRAY FOR VIDA MIKAILA b 1928 KAUNAS LITHUANIA.



Mary accompanied by Nam in a taxi from the Thien An monastery shop.



Mary travelling on the bus.



Dedication at base of the statue.



Wood carver Hoc stands next to the Mary statue.

EYE EXAMINATION AND HEALING GIFT FOR SISTERS HUYEN AND HIEP

During my interlude between visits to Huong Phuong, young sisters Huyen and Hiep had been emailing for English practice. They both complained of pain in the eyes. Hiep in particular was worried that glasses might be “*khong dep*” (not beautiful).

Fortunately for both sisters, an eye doctor examination established that their eye sight was generally good and they were given eye inflammation medication. We then travelled by bicycle to Thien An monastery where we were given a tour by a very kind old monk and where a chain and

crucifix were provided to each Sister that had been blessed by a priest at the monastery. This completed the healing package.



Left to right: Sister Hiep, Sister Huyen, Sister Yen.

GARBAGE REMOVAL FOR THE ORPHANAGE

Sister Luan, in charge of the orphanage, identified a skip for garbage truck removal as an urgent item for the orphanage. Garbage management is a national problem in Vietnam. In places such as the convent and orphanage, much of the garbage (including plastics) is burned in an open fire. At the orphanage it tends to accumulate. Accompanied by several of the Sisters I made a visit to Ba don to price a fabricated steel garbage skip. In the end the Dept of Environment provided offered to provide the orphanage with two skips.

DIGITAL CAMERA

The convent already had one digital camera. Considering Sister Huong's level of general activity and responsibilities, however, (she is in charge of all the novices) I considered that increased capacity to record events would be useful. Even if they don't specifically request it, donors always like to get feed back on how their money is being used. I gave sister a crash course in photography and Photoshop software. My spare camera was then checked out at Saigon then sent on to Sister Huong. Happy snapping, Sister!

ELECTRONIC KEYBOARD

The Sisters consider the Yamaha electric keyboard to be an essential tool for taking music to small communities. A keyboard was purchased in Saigon for a Sister to add to her portable work kit. It provides enough volume and sound effects to service a small village choir.

FEEDBACK TO DONORS

At Canberra a local Vietnamese friend of the dress shop owner had agreed to run me through some word pronunciation. When I offered her payment for the lesson, she refused and gave me \$500 with the instruction, "Give this to the poor when you go to Vietnam".

I felt responsible for spending this money efficiently and justifying the expenditure to each donor. At the convent, I advised the sisters to email each donor and tell them exactly what is being done with each dollar of their money.

At Moss Vale where I work an advice contract for the local council, I met up for coffee with my friend and former employer Dennis. He retired from the civil service to live in the hamlet of Kangaloon. I was once told that I am so tight with my money that when I open my wallet, the moths fly out. Dennis has also said something along the same lines about his spending patterns. So I felt greatly honoured when at the end of our coffee, Dennis pulled money out of his wallet and gave it to me to take to the orphanage. Dennis already provides regular support of an orphanage somewhere in Africa, so this was a bonus.

Members of my immediate family also provided some donations. I drafted some emails for donors and sent drafts to the convent to forward on.

ORPHANAGE PHOTOS



Left to right: Hang, Huong.





Another new baby being fed.



Thu nurses the new baby.



Diem, Hue, Phi.



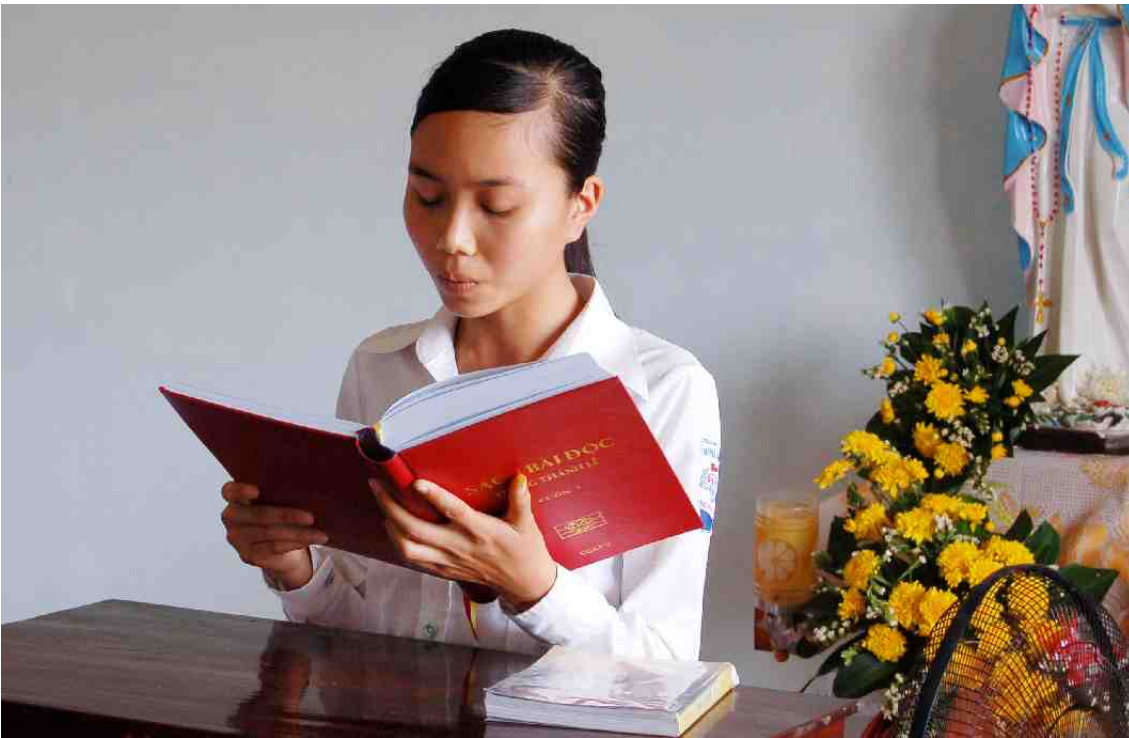
Thu, new baby, Vy, Uyen.



Hang, Huong.



Sister Nga.



Be reads at mass.



Sisters Thanh, Phuc, Phu.



Lien nurses the new baby at the orphanage.





Sister Loi feeds Bao.



Left to right: Tram, Linh, Mai.



Sister Linh nurses a new baby.





Nam.





Left to right: Thu, Sister Hoai, Phi.



Orphanage children at a service in the temporary chapel.