

A Hand of Hope

Deacon Gary Stone, Brisbane

Australian Federal Police (AFP) Chaplaincy is very much a ministry of presence. It requires us to be present physically with people in their work places, to be present emotionally to them in their life issues, and to represent the presence of God with us in the journey of life.

My Chaplaincy visit to Timor from 4 to 11 Feb 08 was planned on the basis of all others . I was to get around and visit our AFP members in both our UNPOL contingent and our Timor Leste Police Development Program, as well as doing some community Liaison with our Timorese hosts.

I spent my first 5 days getting about the many locations, in Dili and in the districts, where our members were serving . With members in country generally working 7 days a week, the opportunity to take some time out to say hello and hear news from the Chaplain is normally quite welcome , especially for the people in the districts experiencing cultural isolation and infrequent news form home. Invariably people have issues they want to get off their chests, and questions about their future they want to ask.

Every trip we Chaplains also find time to meet local community leaders, including local clergy and humanitarian workers.

In my case in Timor I meet up after work with the staff of an organization I founded called Friends and Partners with East Timor, www.fpet.org.au . For the last 8 years we have been involved in meeting community needs through building schools , and health centres, training teachers and health workers, installing water tanks and being a friend to those in need .

Another special treat for me is to catch up with my son Michael who is military and national security advisor to President Jose Ramos Horta. Michael was featured on the 9 April 07 episode of the ABC Australian story , titled the “Peacemaker”. During a previous two and a half year deployment with the Defence Cooperation Program he put enormous energy into learning the local languages and developing relationships with local people , such that when the May 06 crisis erupted he had a major role in community dialogue and facilitating peaceful resolutions to conflicts. After completing his tour of duty in Feb 07 he was personally requested to return to Timor by Jose Ramos Horta when he was elected President in Jun 07.

After completing all my visits on this trip , I preached at the Sunday Mass for UN and International personnel, and was invited to dinner with President Horta and his staff . Having got to know him quite well over a number of visits now, one can't but be inspired by his vision, energy and resilience in building a new country from the ashes of 99. I was particularly touched by his personal priority to eradicate poverty – the real source of many of Timor's current problems.

Early on the morning of 11 Feb , I was sitting in the departure lounge of Dili airport when Michael rang me with the shocking news that there had been attacks upon the President and Prime Minister . The President was very seriously wounded with multiple gunshot wounds and now at the ADF medical facility where Michael had brought him. The President was concerned for, and wanting me to provide spiritual support for his mother and other relatives in Darwin , who had planned to come to Dili that day for a holiday. I offered to

come back to the medical facility but Michael asked me to go direct to Darwin where I could support the wider family and where the President would be med-evaced on a Care-flight as soon as he was stabilized.



survivable.

I arrived in Darwin, located Mrs Horta and her family members and prayed with them before we drove to Royal Darwin Hospital. The developing news of the President's condition was alarming to us all. He had been hit by up to 3 high velocity rounds in the torso and had needed over 9 litres of blood. Having had training and experience in dealing with gunshot wounds in my Army career I knew a trauma of this magnitude would not normally be

Arriving at the hospital's Emergency Department shortly before the President's ambulance arrived, the Director of the Hospital came down to brief us on what they would be doing . He apologized that none of us would be able to see the President for several hours while life saving surgery was undertaken. To my surprise the family spokesman jumped in at this point and insisted that as soon as Jose arrived, the Chaplain (me) be given the opportunity to pray over him. So it was with some sense of awe that as soon as his gurney was pulled into triage, I was able to stand beside him , lay a hand on his head, and hold his right hand , and pray prayers for miraculous healing for him. Admittedly at this time there would have been hundreds and thousands praying for him in other places, but I was able to put flesh to those prayers and minister physically to the severely wounded man fighting for his life. I was able to offer a hand of hope.

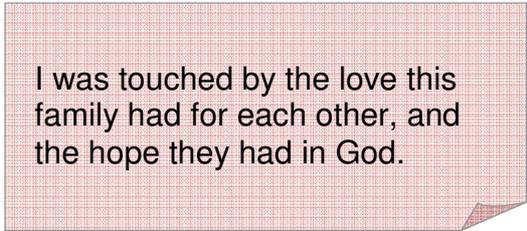
I returned to the family in the waiting room and embraced them. I shared with them what I had seen and done, I prayed again the prayers I had prayed over Jose, and we joined together in praying the Lord's prayer in their native Tetum. I was touched by the love this family had for each other, and the hope they had in God. We then kept vigil in the waiting room for further news. We talked, we sat silently, we held hands, and we wept.

Shortly before midnight, the surgeons briefed us on the progress of their surgery. They were confident of a successful outcome provided infection could be avoided.

On the day following, the family were given their first opportunity to see Jose. One by one I was invited to take them in, holding their hands and we stood beside him , still sedated in an induced coma. We prayed with him, talked to him, (sometimes comatose patients can still hear you), touched him and wished life into him. As the hours went by we got to know each other better, shared stories of our families, and waited patiently for more news. Numerous visitors started arriving offering their condolences. Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Stephen Smith spoke wonderfully to the family and Presidential staff on behalf of all the Australian people, assuring them of our concern for both Jose and Timor . At the same time C130 aircraft flew over head delivering AFP and ADF reinforcements into Dili.

Wed 13 Feb saw Jose receiving more surgery, and more positive reports of recovery. By this time the family had stabilized themselves emotionally, and were confident of a positive outcome. The effects of weariness started to see them needing some rest, and I thought it was an appropriate time for me to return home.

I arrived back in Brisbane that evening to be met by Chap Roger O'Donnell and my wife Lynne. Coincidentally or providentially, Roger was en route to the Solomon's and we shared a meal, providing me with a necessary debrief. Roger and I had kept in touch by phone throughout the crisis. Ministry can never be a lone ranger activity . We need to support each other.



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Jose is now back on the job. His first directions to our son Michael were to forge ahead with his plans to eradicate poverty. He is grateful to God for the many people who assisted in his treatment. I am humbled to have been one of them. May all who read this know your Chaplains will be ready to help you and your family in any of the life crises you may have.

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