

A new focus

Peter and Glenda Roberts

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'Sea change'

Have you ever wondered what happens to retired teachers? After so many years of experience and accumulated knowledge it is mind boggling to imagine them just disappearing from the scene of action they've been a part of for so long. When we found ourselves considering retirement it was with the same fear many had already voiced to us—"What will we do with ourselves?"

There was one possibility, among others that we considered: re-visiting and helping out in mission schools, where we had first begun our teaching careers. We didn't have any firm plans, apart from some needed rest and relaxation. We concluded that while we certainly needed a *new focus*, we were unsure how to discover just what this might be. A close friend was the one to help us find it.

A turning point

We were visiting Tony and Laurel Hay at Fulton College, Fiji, in April 2006. Tony, the principal, made us aware of a need. Despite advances, there were still many village schools in developing countries that had teachers with little or no training. He referred to the many untrained teachers—they number in the hundreds—serving in Seventh-day Adventist schools in Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. Knowing of our teaching background in Pacific island schools, Tony asked Peter for some help in writing a proposal to offer initial training to these teachers in a summer school mode. Successful completion of the program—three summer schools (one month per session), delivered as an off campus course from Fulton College—would lead to a *Certificate of Teaching Practice*, a qualification that was met with considerable enthusiasm. With acceptable results the trainees would gain one year's credit for Fulton College's Diploma of Primary Education course. The proposal was approved by mission administrators, Fulton College (Fiji), and Pacific Adventist University (PNG).

Where and how do we begin? This would be the first of many challenges.

Planning and implementing the program

Location—Initially, it was thought that the program might be started in the Solomon Islands but Jose

Seth, the Vanuatu Mission Education Director, very quickly 'put up his hand'. After a brief visit with him in Port Vila, in April 2007, it was decided to offer Session One of the program to sixty Vanuatu church school teachers in July of that year. We left for Australia to prepare, then returned to begin the program.

Preparation—We consulted with experts, wrote courses, created workbooks, constructed assignments and tests and recruited teachers. The courses offered for that first session were: Philosophy of Christian Education, Education Studies I, Curriculum Studies I—Bible, Reading, Basic Skills English and Professional Practice I. Each course covered 20 hours of class work. Everything was carefully prepared for an island school situation, and despite our familiarity with this context, we were put to the test.

The first summer school

Challenges—There were four lecturers at the July session and all had Pacific islands experience. Hazel Eaton had taught in Fiji and the Solomon Islands, while Dawn Hankinson had previously delivered in-service courses in the Solomon Islands. Both shared their expertise in Curriculum Studies—Reading. This proved to be quite a challenge as the trainees had no access to published reading schemes which are an essential part of the reading program in Australian and New Zealand schools.

Glenda lectured in Education Studies and Basic Skills English; Peter was kept busy with Christian Education and Curriculum Studies—Bible. Both of us had teaching experience in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands and had the advantage of having been teacher educators at Sonoma College (PNG) in the 1980s. Despite our backgrounds, there were times when we needed to slow down our presentations, simplify our vocabulary and adapt tasks that did not quite fit local situations. Jose Seth proved very valuable for explaining difficult concepts the students had not previously encountered.

The learners—There were 63 teachers in total (three turned up unexpectedly), who completed four weeks of intensive study in July. Their ages ranged from 18 to 47; their educational backgrounds mostly from Year 10 to Year 13, with two educated to Year 8 and one who finished school at Year 6. The majority of them were 'volunteers' and often gained their pos-



Reflections, Impressions & Experiences

[Photography: Peter and Glenda Roberts]

ition as teacher because they were the best educated in the village. Their working conditions are basic and resources taken for granted in New Zealand and Australian schools, are mostly non-existent.

Progress—The task of teaching such a large group was a little daunting, but the challenge became quite easy because of the trainees' 'thirst' for knowledge. A tremendous rapport began to develop (on an individual and group basis) between trainees and lecturing staff. By the second week we all felt very much at home with each other. At the end of the first summer school, the trainees returned to their schools 'armed' with long-term assignment work and a desire to implement the principles and skills they had learnt. We returned to Australia, tired, but elated at the program's success, and determined to prepare a session for January 2008 that would equal the first.

The next five months passed quickly and we repeated the preparation process. We also sent first session reports to students, with copies going to Fulton College. We also did some fund-raising 'back home'. The funds allowed us to buy a small supply of simple, easily transported teaching resources for the trainees, and some library books for the Epauto Seventh-day Adventist High School, at Port Vila, where our training sessions were held. (After several years of operation the school still lacked an adequate 'working' library, so Glenda had helped the librarian sort piles of donated second-hand books which had sat in boxes and on dusty shelves for some time. She accomplished this during any available spare time between session lectures, and had promised to begin cataloging during the next visit.)

The second summer school

We succeed despite the weather—January in Port Vila is wet season with hot, sticky days and visiting cyclones. We experienced both situations while conducting session two. It was the air-conditioned accommodation that we returned to each evening that kept us going. (Some nice cafes and restaurants also helped!) At times the trainees struggled to concentrate in the oppressive heat, especially in the afternoon sessions, but they kept up the pace simply because there was so much to learn.

A total of sixty teachers returned for the second session which is a good retention rate. The great rapport developed in July continued. Once again, there were four lecturers from Australia: Cheryl Lis (Curriculum Studies—English); Kerrilynne Campbell (Curriculum Studies—Mathematics); Glenda (Study Skills and Education Studies II) and Peter (Christian Beliefs, Professional Practice I and II. He also co-taught Education Studies II.). It was a first-time Pacific islands teaching experience for Lynne and Cheryl. While initially hesitant, they displayed lecturing skills and produced workbooks that were exceptional. Lecturers based their materials on the

Vanuatu Unified Primary Curriculum as well as their wide knowledge as experienced practitioners.

Quality of work—The efforts of the trainees, their enthusiasm for the program and their excellent results were a constant encouragement to us. It was interesting to note that most had improved tremendously since the first session. They were getting the idea about study methods, applying themselves effectively and were quite willing to approach lecturers when the need for clarification arose. It was evident that a number of academically gifted trainees had the potential to do further studies after completing this certificate.

Completion

The finishing line is in sight—The third and final session is scheduled for January 2009. The trainees have their diaries to complete and we have the whole preparation process to repeat. Ideally in the middle of this year, Peter should visit as many schools as possible with island education supervision personnel to observe the trainees in their classrooms. Unfortunately, the remoteness of many of these little schools, as well as budget constraints means that this might not be possible.

The sixty teachers are keen to complete their study requirements and are looking forward to their last session, followed by a simple graduation ceremony. Already, there is another group of sixty keen for training if another round could be offered.

Teachers in Solomon Islands villages are clamouring for a similar program and would like the opportunity to attain a *Certificate of Teaching Practice*. Possible sources of funding for a Solomon Islands program are currently being explored.

Reflection

We have certainly discovered a new focus—one that allows us to share our teaching skills and experience. Despite the program keeping us very busy, we still we have time for gardening, fun with grandchildren, travel, and even the occasional morning or afternoon nap when it is needed. We have also been reminded once again that in relation to education we live in a 'lucky country' compared to those in the developing world. It is not only satisfying and exciting but also a blessing to share one's knowledge, skills and expertise with Christian teachers who are keen to improve their teaching, as they endeavour to serve the Lord in their local island schools. **TEACH**

Readers interested in helping to provide teaching resources to island church schools or who might like to volunteer for a two-week lecturing session in primary curriculum studies can contact Peter at: robertsaust@aol.com

