**From the Isles of Scilly to the Phillipines with Christian Aid**

Sometimes, out of the blue, you can find yourself volunteering for a task way, way out of your comfort zone; you only know that for some reason you are being led in a certain direction. This happened to me at the Harvest supper in 2018. We had gathered together with our Methodist friends at their hall and after a sumptuous meal, the Chaplain, Canon Perran Gay, gave a talk about the work of Christian Aid and a new initiative Island to Island. Living on a small island, I knew all about the trials and tribulations of weather dependant supplies and travel as well as the joy of simpler life and beauty all around. The idea of helping another group of islands thousands of miles away caught my imagination and before long, I found myself volunteering to join the group going to visit and see for ourselves how Christian Aid was enhancing life for those living on remote islands in the Philippines!

I went with the blessing of not only my church, but also the Methodist & Roman Catholic congregations, to represent the community of the Isles of Scilly armed with a certificate of commission and a contribution towards my expenses. I joined a small group of three ladies from Christian Aid, one from Guernsey, and a gentleman from Jersey and left in March 2019 for a two-week trip. Flying first to Manilla, the capital, we were welcomed warmly by the local branch and spent a couple of days discovering how Christian Aid operates in areas working with the local NGOs.

Then it was time to visit the remote islands, the three of us from islands along with one of the ladies from Christian Aid flew to Iloilo province on an island south of Manilla. Here we were welcomed by two members of a local NGO, who accompanied us in a small open boat to the island of Tabugon. We waded ashore and set off up a dirt path between young palm and banana trees to a small cluster of single-story homes, and to one, built with money from Christian Aid, where we were to stay the night. The people of Tabugon are mainly fisher folk catching squid and crabs but whose existence was nearly wiped out by hurricane Hianne a few years before. Not only had it devastated their homes and surrounding vegetation, but it had also torn up the seabed, including the sea grasses and mangroves where the fish spawn and grow to maturity. With depleting fish stocks across the region, the commercial fisheries moved in close to the island further devastating the fish stocks. With the aid and guidance given by the island to island project the fisher folk of Tabugon had formed a collective, lobbied the authorities and built a defensive barrier around the island to protect the young fish and give the people an area to fish in. Squid are attracted to light, and at night the sky was lit up by the lights of the commercial fishing surrounding the island but now outside the barrier. In the morning it was educational to sit in on a lecture given by experts on coastal management and stock preservation, paid for by island to island. It seemed as if the whole of the village was there and at the lunch that followed.

Tabugon is the only one of the small islands we visited that has mains electricity; none of them have running water. After lunch we waded out to our boat and motored to the next island, Manlot, where once again we waded ashore to a small cluster of homes. Here island to island are providing not only solar panels for the generation of electricity but also the training of engineers to look after them and a shop for goods specially adapted for use with solar power. It was good to sit in such a remote place under the stars and be part of Earth Hour among strangers who felt like brothers and sisters. The next day we travelled as before to the third and smallest of the islands, Talingting. Here they grow seaweed which they sell to the catering trade on the larger commercial islands. Again, with the help of the island to island project, they have formed a collective, learnt more about the best way to grow and harvest the seaweed and persuaded a large fish farm on a neighbouring island not to discharge its waste into the current that goes through and damages the seaweed beds. Without either running water or electricity the people of Talingting have proved that with a little help and guidance they can make a living. One young Mum was in tears as she told us that with what she had made from the seaweed she had been able to buy a pig, and with what she is able to make from the pig she can send her children to school.

My trip to these islands in the Philippines has shown me how we take so many things for granted forgetting to be grateful yet for many they are grateful for having so little. We are one world, one people in God’s eyes, these strangers are my brothers and sisters.

The churches on Scilly continued to support the island to island project until sadly at the end of 2019 Christian Aid had to make the hard choice to pull out of the Philippines and the island to island project has been closed.

I leave the people I met in my prayers and God’s loving embrace. Let us all continue to pray for them and for the work of Christian Aid

Fiona Maybrey

Isles of Scilly