A Personal Account — Walking in Their Shoes

Comfortable shoes. In preparing for my expedition to Nepal, I knew comfortable hiking shoes were essential. I did my homework. I read about shoes. I studied catalogues. I examined pictures. I talked about shoes. I explored the pros and cons of various materials and compounds. I knew what to look for. I was ready to purchase. Then I tried some on — hhhmm, not quite what I expected. Then another pair — I don’t think so. A third pair — Aaaahhh, perfect. Nothing could prepare me for a walk in those comfy boots. No photos, no catalogue, no technical specifications, no sales pitch. Nothing conveyed the reality of the comfort I experienced when my foot slipped into those boots. Walking in shoes is the only way to know what they are really like.

When my $270 super-comfy, light-weight, water-proof hiking boots first touched the dirt floor inside the mud-brick and bamboo classroom at Beldangi I Refugee Camp in eastern Nepal, I wondered if my backpack loaded with pencils and pads would make a difference to the 45,000 Bhutanese refugee children in the camps. I wondered if a few kilos of gifts I had packed were a fair trade for the immeasurable gifts the refugees gave me - the gifts of courage, hope and humility. I doubted it. The gift of awareness I received will certainly outlast the skinny pencils and clean paper I left in Nepal.

Together with 17 other teachers from Lutheran schools across Australia, I set out to experience first-hand the work of Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Nepal, supported by Australian Lutheran World Services (ALWS). The teacher study tour, organised by ALWS, revealed the reality of the displaced and underprivileged. Visiting 6 refugee camps, numerous schools, children’s homes and empowerment programmes ensured that I had the opportunity to walk in the shoes of others. I was no longer simply reading, studying or flicking through brochures. – I was experiencing reality – the sights, sounds, tastes, smells, temperatures, textures, emotions. I was living. Despite the despair and uncertainty, there is an overwhelming sense of pride in the camps. The bamboo huts are well maintained (except the one that was destroyed by a passing elephant just hours before our visit). Students, staff and camp leaders shared many stories; they shared their passion, their heart-break, their frustration. They shared their hopes and dreams: “Don’t give us fish, help us get a river and we will catch our own fish.” Tears landed on my shoes as I tried to imagine standing in theirs.

The two week tour took us through a sensory wonder-land of crowded refugee camps, each with their own schools, staffed by untrained and under resourced teachers. An average of at least 45 students packed into small, simple bamboo shelters. No windows, no electricity, just a mat, book and pencil for each student. Meanwhile, their teachers made use of a small old blackboard and a single stick of chalk. The fruits of their labour were astonishing; students were in many cases achieving higher than non-refugees in Nepal. This was especially evident in their level of spoken English. The students studied diligently, despite the insecurity of their future, despite the state of their classrooms. Your options are limited when your whole life and foreseeable future are contained within the boundaries of a camp. Homeless. Jobless. Uncertainty.
We heard personal stories about forced ‘voluntary migration’, about desires for repatriation or resettlement, about going to bed hungry when there isn’t enough sun to cook rice rations in the solar oven. Yet, amongst the appalling conditions and heart-breaking stories we witnessed hope. Students who imagined, teachers who dreamed. Camp leaders who inspired. Imagine filling their shoes.

As a group of 18 Lutheran teachers, our intention was to develop an awareness of the difficult situation and living conditions in Bhutanese refugee camps so that we could share our experiences with students in Lutheran schools. We want our students to be aware of social and political injustices and explore how LWF and ALWS are living the Gospel through their service to the 107 000 Bhutanese refugees living in 7 camps in far eastern Nepal. We want our students to be aware of the ways in which LWF and ALWS serve Dalits (the underclass) through empowerment programs such as micro-credit and improved farming methods in the Kathmandu valley. We want our students to know about people who dedicate their lives in service to others. We want them to know not just about the problems, but also the ways in which these problems are being addressed by individuals and organisations.

The work of LWF and ALWS in Nepal is simply amazing. The transformative role that these organisations play is critical to the sustainability and development of camps, schools and many villages. 200 LWF staff work in Nepal, many in the field directly serving and empowering those most in need. The money raised by Lutheran schools in Australia this year is currently being used to fund desks and chairs for students in the Bhutanese refugee camps - Students that we met face to face, sitting on the floor in their bamboo classrooms. Students we will never forget.

We want our students to widen their worldview. Perhaps the best way we can help them is to firstly widen ours. Back in our schools we can now effectively and accurately relay messages of hope and courage. We can foster compassion, appreciation and justice through the stories, photographs and videos of our experiences. What better way to explore Lutheran Education Australia’s values for Lutheran schools? What better way to explore Christian service? What better way to explore our Christian responsibilities? What better way to share the wonderful work of the wider church within our school communities? What better way to teach our students these ideas, than to help them walk in the shoes of others?

Prior to the study tour, we had done our homework. We researched the Bhutanese camps. We read about refugees. We viewed pictures. We studied the statistics. We talked about refugees. We listened to stories. Nothing, however, could have prepared us for the experience when we stepped into the refugee camps, the schools and homes of the severely disadvantaged. Nothing conveyed the reality we faced when we walked through the camps. We may not have taken an extended walk in their shoes, but we certainly tried them on. - Shoes they have been wearing for 17 years. We experienced the conditions; we felt the passion, the frustration, the determination. We experienced first-hand a snapshot of life in these camps. I thought I knew about injustice, about courage, about service. I had done my homework. But, just like selecting the right hiking boots, I learnt that you can only really know if you take a walk in their shoes.

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