

Conference: Transforming service
A conference for educators and leaders in Service Learning

Title
The Year of Mercy and Transformative Community Engagement

Abstract

Pope Francis challenges us in the Year of Mercy to engage drawing upon our fragility and gifts. Inspired by Christ we engage each day so that we participate in God's action to make all things new. How do we:

- Engage from an attitude of mercy not arrogance;
- Accompany people in brokenness and disenfranchisement;
- Listen to people's wisdom, vulnerability and mercy;
- Vision shared community engagement;
- Nurture commitment to engaging beyond disadvantage; and
- Transform dominant attitudes and practices.

Case studies of these principles will be discussed in terms of the Year of Mercy and transformative community engagement.

The Year of Mercy and Transformative Community Engagement

Acknowledgement and introduction

I thank you for inviting me to be with you in this Easter season to reflect upon, make decisions about, and affirm our resolve in our “transforming service”. You have blessed me through the invitation and through the timing. Thank you very much.

Easter is the time when we are called and challenged to be one in Christ in making all things new, and this includes being open and active in transforming service learning. But let us remember that Christ is the agent and we are the instruments in transforming service and being open to the invitation to engage.

Let me introduce myself as Professor Jude Butcher, Christian Brother, inspired by the vision and charism of Edmund Rice, founder of the Christian Brothers in Waterford, Ireland. Edmund Rice was attentive and responsive to “Christ present and appealing to us in the poor”. So Christ and the poor are the agents and we are the recipients and beneficiaries.

At this time I acknowledge the Aboriginal peoples of this land of Brisbane and how they have opened their worlds and cultures to us.

The Poor accompanying us in life

Pope Francis focused on people and life when in his farewell words at Juarez City Mexico he quoted and commented upon the Mexican writer Octavio Paz. Octavio says in his poem “Hermandad”:

“I am a man:

I only last a brief while, and the night is vast. But I look up: the stars are writing.

Without grasping I understand: I am also the writing and in this very instant someone is spelling me out”

(Un sol más vivo. Antología poética, Ed. Era, México 2014, 268).

Pope Francis commented:

Taking up these beautiful words, I dare to suggest that the one who spells us out and marks out the road for us is the mysterious but real presence of God in the real flesh of all people, especially the poorest and most needy of Mexico.

The night can seem vast and very dark, but in these days I have been able to observe that in this people there are many lights who proclaim hope; I have been able to see in many of their testimonies, in many of their faces, the presence of God who carries on walking in this land, guiding you, sustaining hope; many men and women, with their everyday efforts, make it possible for this Mexican society not to be left in darkness. They are tomorrow’s prophets, they are the sign of a new dawn.

Year of Mercy

Pope Francis is inspired by God's boundless compassion while also being deeply concerned about the world as a place of conflict, violence, disparities and exclusion. Francis called the Catholic Church and all the world to commit to this Year as a Year of Jubilee, focusing upon making God's mercy and compassion integral to lives personally and collectively. He walked through Doors of Mercy at St Peter's Basilica in Rome and required Doors of Mercy, which he refers to as Holy Doors, to be opened across the world.

For me, Jude Butcher, son and brother of Edmund Rice, and member of Australian Catholic University, the greatest act of mercy is to welcome the poor into my and ACU's personal and communal spaces, where the poor are people of vision, wisdom and transformation for me and us. They lead and guide me and us.

This openness to the other in personal and community engagement is of the essence in responding to the invitation and challenges of Pope Francis in his letter announcing the Year of Mercy. Francis says:

14. The practice of pilgrimage has a special place in the Holy Year (*Year of Mercy*), because it represents the journey each of us makes in this life. Life itself is a pilgrimage, and the human being is a viator, a pilgrim travelling along the road, making his way to the desired destination. Similarly, to reach the Holy Door in Rome or in any other place in the world (*that is to enter into this Holy Year*), everyone, each according to his or her ability, will have to make a pilgrimage. This will be a sign that mercy is also a goal to reach and requires dedication and sacrifice. May pilgrimage be an impetus to conversion:...

This morning we will reflect upon the pilgrimage we are participating in as we are invited *to join other people* as they welcome us in journeying together as pilgrims.

Community engagement as pilgrimage

We, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, are pilgrims reflecting deeply on people and events and being surprised in the revelations open to us.

Christopher William Jones says:

“The Church, certainly, can be nothing but the pilgrim, ever journeying, ever encountering, ever reconciling, showing love to the point of vulnerability, love without limit,..., always and eternally on its way to ... ‘the ground of being’”.

As Christians this journeying, encountering and reflecting as pilgrims has been accompanied by major shifts in understanding of “mission”. Antonia Pernia (2014) states that these shifts reflect changes in our understandings of the origin, goal and mode of mission. The origin of mission is in God; the goal is realising the prophecy of Isaiah (Is:61) and Christ's vision expressed in the

synagogue (Luke 4); and the mode is one of dialogue and engagement with people with whom we find a new sense of being at home. Mission is characterised by a mutuality and reciprocity in the engagement.

Being a pilgrim opens us to being transformed in our sense of wonder and openness to life:

Going on a pilgrimage may give us a new sense of awareness and wonder. Or result in a greater sense of our life's purpose. Pilgrimage helps to illuminate the journey of life by helping us to focus on 'what really matters' and to rediscover the joy of giving and generosity. And to have a greater appreciation for life's gifts.

Learning to be adaptable is the mark of a real pilgrim-it's when the best things often happen. Accept that adversity is as much a part of pilgrimage as the joy and gladness that comes from reaching your destination (The Pilgrims Way website 2016).

Being a pilgrim is integral to how we approach community engagement at ACU. Community engagement is the process through which Australian Catholic University brings the capabilities of its staff and students to work collaboratively with community groups and organisations to achieve mutually agreed goals that build capacity, improve wellbeing, and produce just and sustainable outcomes in the interests of people, communities, and the University.

The University values community engagement as:

- a key means of advancing its Mission in serving the common good and enhancing the dignity and wellbeing of people and communities, specially those most marginalised or disadvantaged;
- integral to its teaching, learning and research; and
- affirming relationships that depend on trust and genuine partnerships with community organisations, institutions and corporations. (ACU, 2012)

Sheehan (2002) elucidated the idea of an "engaged" university further when he described engagement with communities as follows:

Engagement with the human community is not just service to the community through imparting knowledge about social issues and problems. Engagement is a reciprocal process whereby communication is backed up, if possible, by interaction in ways that can effectively alter the way the problem is perceived by oneself and others. Genuine engagement moves beyond the level of mere service and allows the opportunity for societal response to help redefine the nature of the problem itself and perhaps forge new solutions. (p. 136)

Through such community engagement Catholic universities are well positioned to take up their special role in the enactment of the "Church's moral commitment to the Kingdom" (Gascoigne, 2009, p. 53).

Myself and ACU as pilgrims

In reflecting upon community engagement and being a pilgrim I acknowledge the grace of being a pilgrim with the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, the people of

Timor-Leste, the many people in the Clemente program (ACU's university of the streets), the people of Mt Druitt, Campbelltown, Inner west Sydney and so many other places who have welcomed me and ACU into their worlds. These people with their lives and spiritualities have touched and inspired me and so many others at ACU.

Being true to these people in the community engagement has led us to critique policies, structures and processes. We have worked together in creating new opportunities through visioning what is called for and then developing and establishing programs and opportunities. These programs and opportunities have been in the areas of hope-filled learning, engagement of youth through sport, and health and wellbeing for the people.

Students and staff at ACU have been realising that our pilgrimages with communities in Timor and elsewhere, including cities in Australia, opens us to people and places where we don't know the language. The people showed us, when we were ready to listen and learn, that communication is complex and holistic, and we realised that we need to be attentive to more than words to understand each other and travel together, taking the time in community engagement to listen to the people's Story. The stories precede the strategies, or the strategies are shaped by the Story.

A shared priority for everybody was on capacities, conscious that no one can take away from the people or ourselves the new capacities, insights and convictions that we have all developed.

Integrity as pilgrims

Moving from service to community engagement continues to be challenge for us both personally and institutionally. The initial couple of days of Future in Youth a sports program for disengaged and other youth in Baucau saw ACU people challenging each other to engage with the people and not focus upon providing a program or service. The resultant significant shifts in community ownership and responsibility in that program are celebrated by the East Timorese and ACU.

The leadership and vision of the people including those responsible for clinics, parishes and villages have brought a commitment to the Barefoot Nurses train the trainer program for village health workers that extends beyond the cities, towns or villages in which it is offered. This commitment comes also from the National Institute for Health, a government department, which welcomes the engagement and collaboration.

The integrity as pilgrims and the shared commitment in mission bear fruit in mutual trust, respect, collaboration and capacity building for the East Timorese and the Australians. This is nurturing and expressing a shared sense of agency and opening new vision and capabilities.

A profound difference between a pilgrim and a tourist is that the latter people feel like being in an aquarium or zoo. In true community engagement we swim the waters or tread our way through the jungle together. Pilgrims are involved in mission with each other, walking, travelling and eating with the local people.

Tourists, at best, may be involved in mission to the people often doing this with an organisation or agency rather than with the people themselves.

Reflecting and learning as pilgrims

Let us listen to people in the communities: Clemente graduates - Steven Foster wants us to realise the issue is one of social isolation more than disadvantage; Jennifer Shepherd acknowledges the harshness of life but the importance of the journey through which she and others have new responsibilities in the community. John Lusty acknowledged the transitions in his life to the situation where his son is proud of him and he is a key person in St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra.

How do we collectively take up the challenge of social isolation identified by Steven Foster? How do we contribute to the development of personal and collective sense of agency, rather than these people being recipients of our rather than own sense of agency?

Personal and collective sense of agency have been fostered by the people themselves through the conversation club at Homebush. People in the conversation club at Homebush acknowledge that their voices have come alive, and that while previously they were focused on the differences amongst people, they now see how similar they are and how much they have to share.

Reflections from Louisa and Matthew showed the significant changes in themselves as students through their community engagement with the people of Baucau. Louisa moved through her doubts and uncertainties to new confidence in herself, and clarity about whom she wanted to be with through her professional work. Matthew moved from a business-based approach to life to placing people at the centre. He appreciated the importance and sacredness of family and relationships to the East Timorese people.

Let us listen to other insights from students:

“I am now aware of all the people living in the towers opposite our university. I want to spend time with them and help them grow and develop as members of society,”

“Great to be involved with our neighbours!”

“This experience for me has been life changing. This trip has shown me that to make an impact on a child’s life you don’t need material items or possessions. The greatest gift that I can give a child is my time.”

“I can thank Clemente for daily surprises, such as unexpected connections with others and new friends.”

“I have travelled all over and learned about differences, but here I have learned about similarities.”

“I now don't stress the little things in life... there are people in the world who barely have a home or safe food.”

“The Timorese people ... are just amazing. They place each other above all else, they take the time to stop each other in the street and actually care about the response when they ask ‘How are you today, what are you doing?’ To me they were a reminder of true human nature in its simplest form. The smiles, the waves, the interest in your wellbeing; these are the things I will miss, but hope to take back home with me.”

These student comments highlight an integral quality of community engagement (as distinct from service) of engaging with people by doing *with them* rather than *for them*.

Our pilgrimages in context

We are caught today in societies, organisations and cultures in which service connotes delivery of something. In organisations it is delivery of services to facilitate or manage the operational dimensions required for efficient delivery of goods and services. In society the goal, often quite unconsciously but very concretely, is to keep people dependent upon us. Hence we perpetuate dependency and our paternalism. We are to critique the arrogance of the organisations and ourselves involved in such dependency and paternalism.

Robert Lupton, in his book “Charity Detox” (2016) argues that most charity programs hurt people more than they help. However, he has been criticised for not being sufficiently attentive to the people and their situations and in ways he does not necessarily encourage the reader of his book to encounter the person, to live with our neighbour.

Christ asked us to serve rather than to expect to be served. For us to understand Christ’s invitation we need to realise that he invites us to participate in his promise to all: “I have come that you may live and have it to the full” (John 10:10). This is Christ’s promise of mutuality and reciprocity in his relationship with us and all people. It is also his challenge to us that when we respond to his invitation to ministry in Luke 4 and Matthew 25 we do this engaging with each other in deep respect, mutuality, reciprocity, trust and dignity. We are certainly not to do it with any sense of paternalism or arrogance. We take up Christ’s challenge of his washing of people’s feet. It is this mutual, attentive, and respectful human engagement portrayed so well in the painting of Sieger Koder that is the essence of community engagement and engaged service.

Jack de Groot, previous CEO of Caritas Australia, urged the people of Edmund Rice Education Australia at their congress in 2013 to make sure that “we do not baptise being paternalistic”. Sr Cyril Mooney, Loreto Sister in Kolkata, challenged everybody to “weed out the structures which are made for our convenience... and to make sure that we do not take away [people’s] survival skills.”

Allow me to reflect with you upon my personal engagement with Joan, a very close friend of mine since 1967. Joan is in an enclosed and secure area at Dalton Gardens in Sydney. Her bed mattress is on the floor and beside it a crash mat in case she rolls off her mattress. This Easter Sunday I took time with her. Her eyes opened and she said a few words. I shared with her how as a community we had

celebrated Easter, and how my family, whom she knows well, were to be together the next day to celebrate Easter and my sister's 70th birthday. I, and hopefully both of us, had a deep sense of each other's presence. But Joan continues to lead me into a deeper awareness of the mystery of presence. I journalled later, writing:

Joan taking time with you was so special, such a gift. A gift in silence and a gift of presence. Sharing with you in your verbal silence our Easter celebrations and Marie's 70th birthday celebration to be on the Monday. You accept but do not claim a special place in my life journey. In our special space together you show and reveal to me Joan that what I sense you asking of me is: "for every problem life sends, A faithful friend to share" (An Irish Prayer). How special the wisdom you opened in me Joan. Thank you.

Pilgrimage of engagement

We in IACE and ACU are very blessed that the people of Australia, Timor-Leste and other nations continue to show us how they with us can make a difference for themselves and ourselves in terms of human dignity, common good and, in time, ecological sustainability. We walk together in humility and trust, with a shared vision, deep appreciation of the Spirit in our lives, and a commitment in mercy to people's guidance and capacities.

In these pilgrimages of engagement and accompaniment, we pilgrims acknowledge our own brokenness and disenfranchisement, as well as the way the people welcome us into their world of brokenness and disenfranchisement. As pilgrims we can then journey and engage together, conscious of what is now possible as well as being humble in our own limitations and brokenness.

Pilgrims have always appreciated the generosity of "strangers" they meet (cf Emmaus story being open to see Jesus in the stranger) who do not expect to be repaid. Pilgrims are also open to the element of surprises in their pilgrimages as they allow God to bring about the changes.

The pilgrims who join us in IACE include people who hold important positions in the financial and legal world in Australia, and their sense of mutuality is strong. They are committed to the common good in the most practical ways, devoting their time and skill to others because they value them, and wish to journey with them. Staff from law firms have welcomed the opportunity to engage with students and graduates of Clemente Australia and state how the Clemente people have given themselves as lawyers a new sense of agency and connectedness. through the Emerge Foundation people from the financial industry have found a new sense of their being responsible world citizens through their engagement and identification with the people of Timor.

These people disprove the tenet of Piff who claims from his studies that as people grow wealthier, they are more likely to feel entitled, to become meaner, and to be more likely to exploit others — even to cheat them.

This transformative engagement across cultures, sectors and peoples comes from our having shared visions and values in terms of our engagement together. These visions and values are foundational to our commitment to engage in moving together beyond disadvantage. But this commitment is challenging and transforming how we structure our curricula, and our learning and teaching, as well as how we engage in research. This challenge could be seen by many as a journey, but in reality it is more a pilgrimage than a journey, one in which God is ever present and active in ourselves and others.

Foundation of Mercy

This is a pilgrimage in which we as Easter people of hope are committed to community engagement with Mercy as a foundation. We give priority to:

- Humility
 - Recognizing our shared humanity, acknowledging communities' capacities to lead and guide, and putting aside any sense of superiority;
- Attentiveness
 - Listening to the voices of the people, trusting their abilities to name concerns and priorities, and not imposing an outside agenda;
- Graciousness
 - Being respectful in the communal spaces, acknowledging the ownership and leadership of the people with a commitment to reciprocity and mutual respect;
- Kingdom-focus
 - Giving priority to right relationships built upon love and justice, committed to transforming the world and building a better tomorrow and respecting and caring for all Creation;
- Reflectiveness
 - Being committed to engagement-based reflective learning, teaching and research, contributing knowledge and wisdom for personal, social and institutional transformation, and nurturing a sense of the sacred in life and all creation.

The pilgrimages of our students, staff and friends in community engagement have been transformational for us all. They have influenced us as citizens of the world not only for today but also for the world's tomorrows. Our reflections show how we have been challenged to move beyond a sense of personal entitlement to a genuine sense of shared responsibility with fellow pilgrims. As a world community we need to be continually taking the first step out of the empty tomb thus daring to participate in the transformative journey of Easter.