

Come follow me

An experience of volunteering for
Dominican Volunteers International

Dominican Volunteers International (DVI) was established in 2000 as a way to engage lay people (and young people in particular) to participate in the preaching mission of the Dominican Order. The programme draws on the various talents that lay young people bring.

Luke Samy is an Australian who after spending five years studying and lecturing at Oxford University in the UK felt motivated to respond to the words of St Thomas Aquinas when he wrote that he “would rather feel compassion than know the meaning of it”.

Responding to a call to go on mission Luke found himself in the Philippines where he has been catechising the children of the slums, providing moral support to leprosy patients and teaching the children of leprosy patients everything from statistics to morality!

Luke explained how DVI works by sharing his own journey. The process starts with a volunteer who has the desire to preach the gospel. The volunteer is usually someone associated with the Dominican family - a parish, school, community etc. This group becomes the sending community who provides some formation prior to the mission. They also provide spiritual support while the volunteer is on mission.

Luke's sending community is Black Friars at Oxford. Luke already knew the Dominicans as he attended Mass there and when he came to know about DVI he thought this would be a pretty cool experience.

The sending community sends a letter of recommendation to Santa Sabina in Rome. There the international co-ordinator Sr Lucia Fernandez finds a community in the world that really needs the particular skills of that volunteer. Volunteers will always go to a country where people speak their language. Usually English speakers are placed in communities in Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand, Nigeria, South Africa, Trinidad & Tobago and Zimbabwe.

Typically volunteers have a choice of three places of mission—known as the “receiving community”. Luke went on mission to San Lorenzo Ruiz in Dagat-dagatan in the Philippines.

Most volunteers teach religion or do catechesis. What you do depends on what the community needs are. One volunteer in the Dominican Republic preached on the radio, some teach trade skills, others keep the accounts or do administration. There is a range of missionary experiences. It depends on the skills of the volunteer and how they match the needs of the receiving community. Volunteers help in whatever way they can.

One of the key objectives of DVI is to expose volunteers to situations of extreme poverty or suffering in order to show how the Church responds to the needs of the poor in the frontiers of global society.

Dagat-dagatan is one of the poorest areas in Manila. It was designed to be a place where people living in the slums would be relocated to improved housing but due to corruption the area became a dumping ground for people living in slums in other areas. One-third of the people in this area live under the poverty line. Half are unemployed and others only have part time or casual work. Nobody has fulltime employment. The area has very specific needs. Spare time leads to a high crime rate which adds to the suffering of people. Luke teaches religion at the primary school and catechesis to the children in the slums.

Greater and deeper knowledge of what our Lord says in the gospels. We must become like little children in order to inherit the kingdom.

Luke shared that the words "in order to inherit the Kingdom of God you must be like a little child" had always surprised him. His experience of being on mission and teaching children in the slums has helped him understand these words.

The slum children are loving, joyful, open and affectionate children. They show the most affection you will find anywhere. The Lord presents the children as a model for the rest of us.

Twice a week Luke joins two Filipino volunteers to teach catechesis to the slum children. As the group arrive the children shout their names and jump all over them. The lesson takes place on the street outside the homes of the children with no tables or chairs or other aids for teaching. The classes begin with prayers and singing followed by a short talk about a Saint or upcoming feast. The lesson is reinforced by some written exercises. During the lesson the children sit on Luke like he is a couch.

Luke reflected how Jesus must have experienced the same thing when he entered a town and was welcomed but remember too that He received rejection from some.

The openness of the children helped Luke to accept his most challenging assignment. Luke was transferred to Tala which was the old leper colony of the Philippines. Today leprosy is a perfectly curable disease and isolation is no longer required by law however there is still a great stigma surrounding it. Tala remains home to over 80 patients whose families are too poor or too afraid to look after the family member.

Luke was incredibly afraid of catching leprosy. A talk with the head nurse designed to allay his fears magnified his fears not only of getting leprosy but also of contracting TB.

One of the priests invited Luke to pray the rosary with the lepers. Luke was assured he wouldn't need to touch the lepers. The hospital neglects these patients so it is very smelly. Luke was careful not to touch the prayer leaflets in case he got leprosy.

A profound thing happened as they prayed the Our Father and then the Hail Mary. He saw the truth ~ that these people are human beings ... they too are children of God. They too yearn for healing and salvation. They have a desire to love and be loved. They too are made in the image of God. Suddenly Luke's image of ugly deformed people was replaced with beautiful people of prayer.

Luke was really touched when one woman who has been there for 30 years prayed not for her own needs but for Luke.

Luke's attitude changed completely. Now he was eager to hug them, to talk to them, to joke with them and to become their friend. As Luke walked home that evening he realised a special grace had been given to him.

He thought about the words "and you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free". What is freedom? We are free when we are able to do the will of God. The capability of being able to do what God's true freedom is to do God's will. It was the truth about the lepers that enabled Luke to love the lepers. Love God with all your heart and love your neighbour as yourself.

Luke shared how as an academic he organised a series of seminars about financial crises in business throughout history. He was hoping that we could learn from history to prevent financial crises in the future. He was disappointed when after a year of seminars there was no clear answer. He realises now that he was looking in the wrong place. The only true and lasting reform is a change of the heart where you can stop thinking about yourself. Above all you need to see and love Jesus Christ in others.

Luke encouraged others to consider mission opportunities. The only thing you need is the will and desire to preach to others and to have a heart for the poor and the suffering. Christ doesn't rely on your talents - God will release potentialities that you never knew were there. Christ will supply the qualities you are lacking.

Luke concluded his talks with the words of Blessed Pope John Paul II: "I ask young people themselves to listen to Christ's words as he says to them what he once said to Simon Peter and to Andrew at the lakeside: "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people (Mt 4:19). May they have the courage to reply as Isaiah did: "Here am I Lord! I am ready! Send me! They will have a wonderful life ahead of them, and they will know the genuine joy of proclaiming the Good News to brothers and sisters whom they will lead on the way to salvation".