

Helping Ethnic Minorities Through the Gift of Education

By Dionne Alviedo



CHARIS-Barré volunteers helping the ethnic minority teachers with their English exercises

From 25 July to 1 August, eight mission volunteers were sent to Kontum Province in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Their visit was part of a long-term mission that aims to empower the lives of the ethnic minority groups in Kontum, through education and livelihood programmes. Often, ethnic minorities are marginalised and do not share the same education and job opportunities. Through Caritas Humanitarian Aid & Relief Initiatives (CHARIS), volunteers have come together to join the cause of Barré, an affiliate group of CHARIS and the founding team behind mission work in Kontum, where they will be facilitating English lessons.

Redefining the way mission is done abroad, the work in Kontum is testament to the boundless nature of charity. Leveraging on technology, a passionate group of volunteers in Singapore has been guiding the pioneer batch of three students through Skype – a software that provides video communications – since 2013. The work started by Barré has seen the first batch of students progress significantly in their learning of the English language. The programme in Kontum is now in Phase 2 where five new students are added to the programme and taught by the three pioneer students. In time to come, these Phase 2 students will then provide their fellow villagers the opportunity to learn English.



A Phase 1 Teacher conducting an English lesson

The CHARIS-Barré mission trip served as a bridge between the online volunteers in Singapore and the community of students in Kontum. The eight mission volunteers planned and conducted an intensive series of lessons for the week. More importantly, they evaluated the current effectiveness of the programme and identified areas for improvement. This is crucial for the education programme's sustainability and progress towards the next phase.

The mission volunteers also visited the surrounding villages in Kontum to further assess how the work can be expanded to touch the lives of more people. In the future, these eight mission volunteers will lead other volunteers from Singapore to Kontum to continue sowing the seeds of hope in the lives of the ethnic minorities.



Visit to an orphanage in one of the villages

Practically strangers before the mission trip, the eight volunteers have now become a close-knit family of missionaries who have grown together in their faith. "The daily Mass, formation sessions and sharing of the Catholic Social Teachings have helped in centering us to Christ which kept the team together despite the challenges we inevitably faced", commented volunteer Martin Teo.

That this mission trip touched and impacted the lives of the missionaries themselves is an understatement. When asked whether they would continue doing mission work, all of the volunteers passionately said yes. Another volunteer, Simon Soh, remarked: "God has always been the centre of my life and is my driving force to be of service to mankind especially to those who are deprived of education and daily basic needs. Honestly, I was deeply moved by the village visits and the students. I felt a deep sense of pain from poverty, yet happiness and contentment among the students and the villages."



Team CHARIS-Barré together with Phase 1 and 2 teachers