

CHARIS Mission trip to Pongro, Cambodia (24-29 March 2014)

by Edwin Sim

Not many people would have heard of the small village of Pongro in Kompong Svay Commune of Banteay Meanchey Province, Cambodia, myself included. Our team of 8 CHARIS volunteers were there to lend a hand with the construction of toilets and bathrooms as well as two bored wells which were from funds donated by CHARIS as well as to prepare for future partnership with the local community.



When we arrived at the small parish church of St Francis Xavier on 23 March 2014, we were warmly welcomed by the children and youth who stayed at the youth hostel there, as well as by the Parish Priest, Fr Rajat, SJ.

The children and youth are very friendly. They enjoyed practising speaking English with us. Although all of them come from very poor families, it did not stop them from harbouring hopes of attending University and returning to their village to help after graduation. Take Silong for example, one of the Cambodian students there. Her dream is to be able to study rural development. She hopes one day to be able to return and help with the development of her province. Her annual university course fees are estimated to be USD400.00. We also found out that it costs approximately USD250.00 for a student to pursue studies in education and teaching, USD450 for accounting and engineering and USD1,700 to USD2,500 for a medical course each year. For these students, the tuition fees alone are a huge financial burden and they often work in the fields supporting their family while juggling school work as well.



It made me think about how much our own children in Singapore take education for granted.

At the village itself, we were warmly invited to their homes. We took photographs of each family and printed them so that each family could have their own collection of family portraits.

The most pressing concern appears to be the lack of clean drinking water. The local community relies on water trucks once every two weeks, and the quality of the water is not ideal.

The two bored wells donated by CHARIS went some way towards helping the local community, but the longer term plan is to raise funds so as to pay for water supply from the local government.

Fr Rajat brought us to the local kindergarten built and supported by the parish and we saw the enthusiasm of the pre-school children attending classes. They were taught by the older University students who in turn obtained support for their studies from the local parish. Fr Rajat reminded us of how important it was to pay it forward and one of the ways we could help would be to provide financial assistance to the students.

One of the volunteers, Isabelle Leow, 34, had this to say “it was humbling to see people in Pongro without electricity and clean water, kids without shoes or clothes running around and eating ants and crickets to supplement their diet. Yet they welcomed us with open arms and wide smiles. I hope the village will be able to get more aid so that at least their basic needs can be met. “

For more information on the parish of St Francis Xavier in Banteay Meanchey Province and the work that Fr Rajat is doing or if you are interested in helping, please visit <http://banteaymeancheychurch.wordpress.com/>.

For more information on CHARIS, please visit <http://www.charis-singapore.org/>.