

From Newry to Odzi – A Journey into

Mission

Mission Sunday is a time when we're invited to think beyond our own parish, our own community and even our own country, and to remember that we're part of a much bigger Church and a much bigger family.

For me, this year, Mission Sunday has a very personal meaning.

I'm writing this from Odzi, a rural community just outside Mutare in Zimbabwe, which is now home for a while. When I left Newry in June, I knew I was coming to a very different environment, but I don't think you can ever fully understand what that means until you actually live it.

There are many things I miss about home – family, friends, familiar places and, of course, probably the odd bit of Irish weather! But I have also discovered a very different way of life here, and I have been welcomed into a community that has taught me far more than I expected.

My work here has brought me into the heart of a rural school and community. St John the Baptist Primary and Secondary School has more than 450 pupils and a dedicated team of teachers and staff. I spend much of my time looking at ways in which we can support the school and improve the environment in which these children learn and grow.

And this is where I have come to understand mission a little differently.

Before coming here, I might have thought of mission mainly in terms of projects – building something, providing equipment, raising money or finding practical solutions to problems. Those things are certainly important, and there are plenty of projects to keep us busy!

But I am learning that mission begins with people.

It begins with listening. It begins with relationships. It begins with being willing to understand another person's reality rather than assuming that we already know what they need.

The children at the school have made a particular impression on me. They are children – they laugh, joke, make friends, get distracted, get excited and have big dreams for their futures. Elizabeth wants to be an accountant; Trey wants to be a teacher. Praise wants to have a hair salon. In many ways, they are exactly like children anywhere in the world.

But their circumstances can be very different.

Some live a considerable distance from the school. Getting to school can involve travelling along rural and sometimes dangerous roads, and for some children

there are long journeys through bush areas where encounters with animals such as wild dogs, hyenas and snakes, and scorpions are a genuine concern. It's very different from worrying about whether the school bus is going to be late!

There's also challenges facing young people here that, coming from Ireland, I find particularly difficult to comprehend. One of these is the reality of early childhood marriage. For many children growing up in Ireland, the idea that a young person as young as 11 or 12, might be expected to marry while they are still a child would be completely alien. Here, however, early childhood marriage is a reality that some young people and families have to face.

It's another reminder of how important education, safeguarding and opportunity are. Keeping children in school, giving them a safe environment in which to learn, and helping them to develop confidence and hope for their future can make a profound difference.

Every child deserves the opportunity to grow up, discover who they are, develop their gifts and make choices about their own future.

This is one of the reasons I feel that the work around the school and the development of a hostel is about so much more than buildings. It's about creating a safe and supportive environment where children can simply be children, where they can learn from one another, be protected, and begin to imagine a future that may be very different from the circumstances they were born into.

Living here has made me realise how easily we can take certain things for granted back home. We grow up expecting our children to have the opportunity to remain in education, to be protected as children and to have time to grow into adulthood. Here, those opportunities cannot always be taken for granted.

That's why I've become so passionate about creating safe spaces for these young people. Education is not simply about passing exams. It can be a pathway to greater confidence, independence and choice. It can give a young person the chance to look beyond the circumstances immediately around them and believe that another future is possible.

Perhaps one of the biggest surprises for me since coming to live here has been how much I have learned from the people I came to assist.

I have learned about resilience. I have learned about making the most of what you have. I have learned that people can have very little materially and yet still be extraordinarily generous. I have learned that community matters.

And I have learned that sometimes simply being present and listening can be just as important as finding a solution.

There are certainly difficult days. Resources are limited, needs are many and progress can sometimes feel frustratingly slow. But then you see a group of children laughing together, a teacher proudly talking about their pupils, or a

small project beginning to take shape, and you are reminded why the work matters.

Living here has also deepened my understanding of what it means to be Franciscan. People first. Human dignity. Care for creation. Service. And perhaps most importantly, walking alongside people rather than simply doing things for them.

I still feel very connected to Newry. Being so far away has actually made me appreciate home in a different way. And when I think of my parish community there, I realise that although Zimbabwe and Newry may seem worlds apart, we are not really as far apart as we might think. The prayers, encouragement and interest of people at home become part of the mission here.

So, this Mission Sunday, I would like to say thank you. Thank you to those who pray for missionaries and for the communities they serve. Thank you to those who support mission projects, often without ever seeing the people who will benefit. And thank you to my own parish community in Newry for allowing me to share a little of my life here in Odzi. I hope that when you think of Mission Sunday this year, you might picture not just a faraway country or an unfamiliar community, but some of the children I have come to know.

Picture them walking through the school gates in the morning. Picture them sitting in their classrooms, learning. Picture them laughing with their friends. Picture them playing football, teasing each other and dreaming about what they might become.

They are not statistics or projects. They are young people with hopes, talents, dignity and enormous potential. And I feel very privileged to be here, walking alongside them for a small part of their journey.

From rural Zimbabwe, I send warmest greetings to everyone back home in Newry. Happy Mission Sunday. And please keep the children, families, teachers and community of Odzi in your prayers.

From one community to another, we are all part of the same family.
Louise



A drone view of the secondary school, where I live on site



Some Form 4 pupils studying....



A special treat.... Getting an orange for break



Grade 7 pupils with their teachers and Sr Mary



Elizabeth, Praise, Sheron, and Takudzwa leaving the hostel to go to class.....



Me sitting with all the pupils and the principal at mass



Me addressing all the pupils, both primary and secondary, after mass.



Some of the Primary pupils happy to get their photos taken...



With Fr Francis, who was visiting from Ireland, and Fr Simba



Being greeted by Parishioners after mass



With the Sr's and Priests from the neighbouring parish, Checheche.....



Receiving a gift of Tomatoes for the priests in Checheche



Meet John, Lucia and Thomas.....a family of orphan children I have been supporting



Meet Joy, she's just watching all that's going on around her ☺



Happy Children enjoying a laugh



