

THOUGHTS ON TRAINING OVER THE YEARS: HELEN VAN KOEVERING

1. Today, I saw in someone's face what it meant to realize that they are loved. A new course has begun for our community priests, and we are working through a course called 'Rooted in Jesus' which we want these priests to then pass on to their own congregations – we're 'training the trainers', a current buzz word in development. One man has told us all several times how many congregations he oversees that are entirely new, filled by many new believers, in a particularly impoverished part of our diocese – I think he must be feeling overwhelmed! We began with the basic question: what is a Christian? This question begs the initial thought of what it means to be created by God, and the subsequent point of how God feels about His creation. The discussion led to how we can know that God loves us, and one man, who had seemed so tired and distracted, suddenly declared that God loves only those who obey Him. But when everyone responded to say that our Creator clearly loved everyone regardless of who they are and what they do (every woman and man, old and young, educated or not, black and white, poor and rich, Christian or not), his old, worn face beamed. God's love means that whatever we've done, whoever we are, wherever we find ourselves, God's love remains. And now this man can take this revelation to others – and I enjoy the thought of even more faces lighting up at the recognition that they are loved....
2. Ours is a church grown from the commitment and work of the laity, especially the catechists, men (I know of only one woman catechist) who lead the worship of the church on Sundays and take responsibility for almost everything else in the church's week that doesn't require a Eucharist, it seems. Our diocese, with about 400 congregations and only 26 priests, would not exist without these folk – we are celebrating them all next weekend with the ordination of 25 ordinands after two years of training. I have thoroughly enjoyed being part of the training team, growing with them, hearing what they understand of 'church', 'service', 'ministry'. All of them are natural evangelists and pastors, speak as their people speak, live as their people live, know as they are known by their people and their God. They have taught me something of the truth being found in clay pots, shaped by the potter. I feel encouraged for the communities in which they work and make God known.
3. Mark is speaking at a Conference in Malaysia this week. Our diocese is experiencing some unusual church growth – there has been a 25% increase in both membership (to around 55,000) and new congregations (to 350), and 50% increase in priests (now 42). Based on this growth, Mark has a vision to see 1000 congregations with 100,000 members by 2013. Perhaps the key to growth has been in encouraging all-member ministry and small groups as we've tried to keep pace alongside the generosity of God's Spirit; perhaps it's envisioning Christians for responsibility and discipleship, including developing leadership and welcoming others to train us; perhaps it's the fuel of prayer. Mark likes to go back to his roots as an agriculturalist and liken church planting to the planting of 10,000 hectares of trees as project partners to four forestry companies around our diocese. That has involved generosity of investment, training in new responsibilities and opportunities, and much planning and discussion of hard issues. One thing is sure - whether it be with lives or land, churches or trees, we are dependent on God's life-creating Spirit: "When you send your spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground." (Psalm 104:30)

4. Mark and I are encouraged after this last week of training we have run for community priests in the diocese. Twenty-five catechists have participated – people who have had several years serving their local churches, and who we're hoping to see ordained to continue serving their communities and ministering the sacraments. This first week, it was important to focus on spiritual formation and Christian leadership – and attempt to begin to discern the calling on these men's lives (no women yet...), making the presentations culturally relevant and experientially appropriate. Early in the week, Mark spoke about knowing and seeing God in our communities and daily lives, and Albano voiced what perhaps many were thinking – 'how can we know and see God?' Exercises, explanations and exhortations followed, and will continue. Leadership training, someone once told me, is making people more today than they were yesterday – but I saw this week that Christian leadership is making God more in people's lives today than He was yesterday. And that is where the privilege begins....

5. I have never seen anything like it. A week's conference on evangelism in our diocese has finished with a bang – an inspiring service with the eighty conference participants and some guests, and an offering that had to be seen to be believed! Luis, one of our evangelists, had given some teaching about giving to God and God's work during the week, but this is a largely rural church in the poorest province of one of the poorest countries – and what was given at this evening's service would shame the richest in this world! Money was given, as well as coats, shoes, handbags, sweaters, shirts, with such joy and generosity, dancing and singing. An Angolan visitor from a Christian development organization was moved to tears. Luis is convinced God is doing something great amongst us, and, after seeing this, perhaps I can dare believe it!

6. Gardening

We have some missionaries staying with us for a few days. As usual, the lights went out half way through our meal – but candlelight often helps to encourage good conversation. We talked about the missionary desire for evangelism and church planting, and what that means in this area, where there is an abundance of full churches of a variety of denominations, but local leadership lacking confidence and resources with little support and training. What is the role of the missionary in such a place? Perhaps it is the challenge to be not planters, but waterers of churches, helping to root churches rather than scatter the seed for them. Yet again, maybe it is not for any of us to seek to be known for our planting or watering, but for being gardeners with God, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians. Perhaps seeing ourselves as gardeners together in God's field, we'll listen more humbly, speak more quietly, support more prayerfully, share more lovingly and celebrate more joyfully the growth of God's life together. And then, who are the missionaries? Every Christian, everywhere.