CHRISTIAN AID IRELAND TRIP TO ZIMBABWE. MARCH, 2014

 Report by Canon George Irwin.

I must admit to having felt apprehension and uncertainty and not a little fear shortly after accepting the invitation to join the Christian Aid Ireland team going to Zimbabwe. This had much to do with a perception of Zimbabwe gleaned from media reports about social and political unrest and disputes about election results and poor relations within government etc. However, my expectations were given a hopeful boost by the team’s meeting in Dublin in October, 2013 with Miriam Machaya,the Zimbabwe Christian Aid Country Manager and her colleague Dorothy. It was reassuring to know that we were going to be in the hands of an experienced and competent Christian Aid staff during our trip.

I looked forward to meaningful and albeit some exhausting and even harrowing visits to projects ranging from urban-based advocacy groups to situations of rural poverty. As a school governor for over 25 years I was pleased to learn that visits to educational projects in Binga in the west of Zimbabwe would be a significant feature of the trip. Above all, I expected the trip to be informative and thorough and a valuable opportunity to see at first hand the work being supported by Christian Aid volunteers and subscribers at home.

Arriving in Zimbabwe, the experience of being checked through Harare airport was strange and forbidding, not least because the arrivals lounge was largely deserted and much in need of refurbishment. The bus ride from the airport to our accommodation was pleasant and interesting – bright sunshine and trees in bloom in contrast to the leaden skies and low temperatures of home! The knowledge of curfew in parts of the country and the tense atmosphere on the streets at night, whilst disconcerting, was not a big shock to one whose student days were spent in Belfast during the worst of the Troubles of the 1970’s.

Participation in worship at Marlborough Methodist Church, Harare on the day after our arrival was a most uplifting and inspiring experience. The vibrancy and joy of the worship and the genuine warmth of fellowship among a large congregation left a lasting impression of what it means for a people to really celebrate the basis of their faith. The spiritual enrichment of this experience of worship and fellowship in an impoverished country reminded me in a powerful way of St. Paul’s assurance to the Christians at Corinth that their reaching out to their poverty - stricken brethren in Judea would be to their own spiritual benefit. (2 Corinthians, chapters 8 and 9) Throughout our visit, the spirituality of the people we met was evident in their ability to cope with adverse circumstances. In many instances we encountered joy and good humour, and very little evidence of people feeling they were victims.

The first project visited by the Christian Aid Ireland team was the Artpeace Co-operative at Salveira House, a short distance from Harare. I felt a deep sense of admiration tinged with sadness as we conversed with this group of highly skilled sculptors and artists who, despite their dedication and expertise, struggled to find a market for their produce. Indeed, so eager were they to meet with us and to sell their works of art that they had waited (and fasted) from early morning until our arrival at 4.30 p.m. Their palpable frustration will be a lasting impression.

The long drive from Harare to Bulawayo was fascinating, not least because it was my first experience of seeing the endless stretches of Savannah I had learned about in geography classes at school many years ago. The appearance of round huts built with mud and wattles and roofed with thatch was a sobering reminder that living conditions for people in such areas may not have changed appreciably over the centuries.

Visits to several projects in Matabeleland South brought a variety of emotions : admiration for the positive attitude and dignified demeanour of those involved in enterprises such as shoe making, gardening, furniture manufacture and dress making; a sense of shock and sadness at seeing the reality of grinding poverty for the first time ; anger at the thought of huge expenditure on armaments and weapons of destruction whilst such life-enhancing projects were given such meagre assistance; but a real feeling of hope and gratitude to God that organisations exist like Christian Aid which are prepared to ‘ light a candle rather than curse the dark.’

As we moved westward towards Binga I had prepared myself for more shock and sadness at the expectation of further exposure to grinding poverty. However, whilst we encountered such poverty to a disturbing degree, there were in this district really inspiring shafts of hope emanating from educational projects sponsored mainly by Open Schools Worldwide, an organisation dedicated to providing education for children who otherwise would never have had an opportunity of even learning to read and write because of circumstances of poverty and isolation. Teachers such as Robson and Moses shone like beacons of hope as they achieved remarkable levels of literacy and numeracy with the most meagre of resources. As I sat and listened to them give an account of their work and the difference made to the lives of these children I gained a much deeper insight into what a sacred activity education really is.

Reflecting on this trip to Zimbabwe I feel a deep sense of gratitude that I have been privileged to be part of such a worthwhile exercise. After long years of watching and reading documentaries and news items on conditions in poverty- stricken parts of the world I thought I had learned much about the subject of world development and the causes and consequences of impoverishment, but to see such conditions at close quarters enables one to gain a whole new perspective and understanding. I now also realise that to say ‘we must live more simply so that others may simply live’ is not just a clever- sounding cliché; it points to a disturbing and uncomfortable reality.

It certainly has been a life-changing experience. I am now much more thoughtful about spending on luxuries and I have gained a deeper understanding of the need to exercise a sense of responsibility with regard to the purchase and use of food. And thanks to having had the opportunity to visit projects supported by Christian Aid I feel I can speak with a greater degree of authority and credibility when I commend the work being carried out by this organisation in the name of Him whose manifesto began :

 “ The Spirit of the Lord is on me,

 because he has anointed me

 to preach **good news to the poor**.” (Luke 4 : 18)

George Irwin. 23 / 04 / 2014