

A summary of the Brother's Ministry in Cambodia

Brother Kevin Lampard was the first Australian Marist Brother to spend some time in Cambodia. His commitment to the Cambodian boat people detained in Port Hedland in the mid 1990's had attracted the attention of the Australian government. He was asked by them to travel back to Cambodia with those people as a guarantor that their application for entry to Australia would be honoured.

Br Kevin was therefore able to welcome Br Robert Badior and Br Paul Turner when they arrived in Phnom Penh in 1996: they had been appointed to Cambodia by the Provincial and Council who wanted the Marist Brothers to make some contribution to the reconstruction of that country. The two Brothers had the task of beginning the work of the Marist Brothers of Sydney in Cambodia.

They had to face all the uncertainties that came with wanting to find an appropriate role for themselves and get started. They were greatly helped by various organizations, Maryknoll especially. As well as language study they spent much of their time teaching English and working with others in education to develop resources and courses. Later that year Br Claudius Mason arrived to become the third member of the community.

In 1997 Br Terry Heinrich arrived. His task was to find a focus for the work of the Brothers. Consultations and visits followed and by November the Provincial and Council had accepted the recommendation that an elementary school for children and young people with physical disabilities be established.

1997 was an unsettled year in Cambodia. Political turmoil came to a head with intense fighting in July the aftermath of which was the entrenchment of one political party. Subsequent elections served only to further consolidate its position.

In February 1998 a survey to determine that there was in fact a clientele for the new school, was conducted in Phnom Penh using a team representative of Ministries of Education and Social Action, prospective staff, the Brothers and other supportive organizations. Although a survey unlike any other it generated enough data to support the establishment of a school.

Brothers Robert and Paul had returned to Australia in 1997. In February 1998 Brothers Claudius and Terry oversaw a change of residence to Tuol Toum Pong to the site of what was to be the school, rented premises in Street 430. Recruiting of prospective teachers from among the community of handicapped people began. So too did teacher training, under the direction of Maryknoll missionary, Patty Lamothe and Soun Neang destined to be the school's Deputy Principal.

The school, as yet unnamed, commenced classes on June 22, 1998. There were 42 students, 20 of whom lived-in. Two third- or fourth- hand mini buses brought the other 22 and staff to school each day. The staff numbered 18, 15 of whom were Khmer, 6 of

whom had some form of physical disability. The teacher training continued on-the-job for the next few years.

Brother Claudius returned to Australia in 1999. His replacement, Br Alex Moss, was in Cambodia until mid 2000. Br Darryl Slater arrived in April, 2000.

In March 2000 the construction of the school at Takmao began and in October the school, now named LaValla, began its third year.

More building followed: in 2002 the hydrotherapy pool and in 2004-05 a dormitory for girls with bathroom and toilet block and a workshop. The most recent building, finished mid 2008, provides two staff units and additional bedrooms.

Since LaValla began, 364 children and young people with disabilities have enrolled. 198 of them graduated having completed Grade 6. In 2002 the Yodiffee project, (Youth with disabilities foundation for education and employment,) began. It pursues one of LaValla's original aims: to help the young people with disabilities go as far as possible with their formal education. Villa Maria, its construction funded by the Marist Fathers of Australia-Oceania, was completed in 2005.

Written by Terry Heinrich May 2009