

GED NAUGHTON AND JAMES TREWBY

# Not fade away

For some gap-year students, voluntary work overseas is just a brief interlude between school and university. But for those undertaking the Salesians' volunteering programme, the time spent abroad is just the beginning

While there is no doubt that volunteering in developing countries is popular, it has not been free from criticism. Over the last couple of years it has been accused of somehow exploiting the poor to allow wealthy Brits a "feelgood" opportunity – digging wells, planting trees, hugging babies – before returning to comfort and a university place in the UK.

Just over two years ago, Bosco Volunteer Action (BOVA), the UK Salesians' overseas volunteering organisation, began to do something to combat the perceived negative image of volunteering.

"Some volunteers felt they were 'doing their bit', but were not truly challenging their preconceptions of the developing world or the root causes of poverty. We resolved to move from a focus on simply sending volunteers to work with Salesian communities around the world, to providing something different – a more ethical model, focused on volunteers learning through service," said Fr Bob Gardner SDB, who is BOVA delegate for youth ministry. The learning process starts long before the volunteer sets foot in a Salesian community overseas. At the training weekends, volunteers are encouraged to ask themselves difficult questions about their personal motivations, fears and hopes for the experience. What do they expect from living in a Salesian community in a foreign country? Why did they choose to volunteer with BOVA and the Salesians? Why volunteer at all?

The preparation sessions, which continually evolve following input given by Salesians from around the world, are challenging but fruitful, covering a range of topics from neo-colonialism, racial prejudice and cultural preconceptions, through to attitudes concerning development and underdevelopment. The training weekends aim to pre-empt questions that may arise both during and following the volunteers' placements.

One returned volunteer, Matt Gottwald, said: "At the time, I couldn't see where they were going with all these questions, but it made sense while I was away. It felt much deeper than the training I'd expected and I was glad to have been thoroughly prepared in this way, not as if I was just going off on my holidays." Mr Gottwald spent two months working alongside the Salesians with ex-child labourers in India, but struggled at times with communication. He found that the sessions on intercultural learning and working with

young people helped him to challenge his impatience and find ways round the problems: "When I was having difficulties the training suddenly made a lot of sense."

BOVA now aims for a number of outcomes: a useful service given to host communities, volunteers exploring what it means to live faith in action, an involvement in the Salesian family and a continued engagement with issues related to poverty. The theory is that an experience of working alongside the Salesians in a developing country, combined with opportunities for reflection and learning, will lead to volunteers developing long-term commitments to poverty reduction that won't fade away when they have returned home.

Fr Gardner said: "This new approach seems to be popular – we are receiving increased numbers of applications from people of all ages – and there are currently volunteers in homes for street children, vocational training centres, schools and youth centres in El Salvador, India, the Philippines, the Solomon Islands, Nigeria, Tanzania and Swaziland. BOVA is a not-for-profit organisation so some may be attracted by the absence of a placement fee charged by commercial organisations, but others appear to be searching for an organisation which has taken the criticisms of volunteering seriously."

**'Volunteers are forced to realise that they cannot "do their bit" solely in a short stint overseas, while we have had to make serious commitments in training'**

The emphasis on learning continues during and after placements. Returned volunteers act as support workers, sending formation materials designed to stimulate reflection on faith, community and poverty. These thoughts are then drawn together in the assignment focusing on a specific aspect of their experience to create an educational resource. Among those completed so far are a leaflet about HIV/Aids and access to antiretroviral drugs in Swaziland, and a pack of games and drawings from children in the Philippines. These projects help volunteers to see their time overseas as just the beginning.

"We think the way we are doing things now is actually more exciting for participants, because it makes for a deeper experience all round. It's certainly more challenging – volunteers are forced to realise that they cannot 'do their bit' solely in a short stint overseas, while we've had to make serious commitments to training and formation – but it has been worthwhile. People come back changed and it is a change that lasts," says Fr Gardner.

The Provincial of the British Salesians, Fr Michael Winstanley SDB, notes that this approach finds a natural home within the Salesian charism: "Don Bosco believed passionately in young people reaching out to other young people, and in this way sharing his mission to poor and needy young people. Volunteers living, praying and working alongside SDB Religious in one family is also integral to his vision. He saw education as a process – so it is crucial that returned volunteers are continuing to develop as educators. Finally, the qualities of awareness of others' need, generosity, hard work, self-sacrifice, joy, optimism, and 'presence' are key elements of Salesian spirituality – which are certainly shared by our volunteers."

Kat Ellis, who volunteered for three months in an orphanage in Bolivia, said: "Volunteering isn't just about being abroad; it's about the impact it has when you return – on you, your friends, family and wider community." After returning to the UK, Kat went on to help organise a conference looking at poverty and solidarity. Other returned volunteers have assisted at training weekends, supported new volunteers going overseas, raised money for host communities, attended Salesian events and taken part in anti-poverty events.

These changes to the way BOVA worked were essential if it was to address criticisms of gap-year and volunteer schemes in developing countries, but they're paying off. However, the learning process continues and BOVA will be continuing to look at how to improve both the service and learning aspects of volunteering. Meanwhile, another group of 11 volunteers is preparing to take up placements this year in Salesian communities in Africa, Asia and the Americas.

■ Ged Naughton is a returned volunteer now working at Cafod. James Trewby is a youth ministry worker for BOVA. For more on BOVA visit: [www.boscovolunteeraction.co.uk](http://www.boscovolunteeraction.co.uk).