

JOSEPHINE MITCHELL RSJ

Sister Josephine Mitchell RSJ has been a teacher and a leader of considerable skill in her many years as a Sister of St Joseph, the Congregation founded by St Mary MacKillop.

Josephine has degrees in Arts, Literature and Education and did overseas post-graduate study in Theology and Spirituality. Her teaching experience covers primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Josephine held major leadership roles within the Congregation of the Sisters of St Joseph for twelve years and was a lecturer in Teacher Education at the Catholic College of Education (now the Australian Catholic University). She has had a long involvement in matters of justice including two years on the Justice Desk of the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes.

When Indonesia invaded Portuguese Timor in 1975, Josephine was deeply upset and has retained her anguish for the people to the present day. In various leadership capacities in the Sisters of St Joseph she had occasion to follow the fortunes of the Timorese and met Monsignor da Costa Lopes, the Apostolic Administrator of East Timor when he visited Australia in 1983, hearing from him at first hand the plight of the Timorese people.

In 1993 Bishop Belo of the Diocese of Dili approached the Sisters of St Joseph and asked for their help, specifically in the areas of literacy and health education. Teaching children to read and write in the main local language Tetun, was central to the enterprise. Tetun is the *lingua franca* of Timor-Leste and the first-named official language of the new nation. The Sisters entrusted the work to Sister Josephine Mitchell and established the Mary MacKillop Institute of East Timorese Studies (now Mary MacKillop East Timor Mission *MMETM*) on August 8, 1994.

There are huge challenges to education in Timor-Leste. The administrations of Portugal (450 years) and Indonesia (24 years) did not place any priority on the need of the Timorese people for education resulting in unacceptably high illiteracy rates today. With half of the population under the age of 18 the people face immense educational hurdles.

Tetun Literacy Program – *Mai Hatene Tetun*

The practical measures Sister Josephine and *MMETM* took to fulfil the Timorese request and promote Tetun literacy included the production of a school literacy program called *Mai Hatene Tetun* (Let's Learn Tetun). It is based on sound educational principles accepted worldwide, that is, to proceed from the known to the unknown. It acknowledges that children must learn the process of reading in a language that is already familiar to them, otherwise their time is wasted and their culture dishonoured.

Under Josephine's direction *MMETM* produced and distributed the wide range of Tetun which comprise the program. *Mai Hatene Tetun* consists of 81 titles for Grades 1, 2 and 3 complete with teachers' manuals and guides, dictionaries and support materials. Five books each with about fifteen stories are in each of the Years Four, Five and Six sections. There are more than forty titles in the Kindergarten series accompanied by teachers' materials. Literacy teaching aids for use across the grades include charts, games and thousands of flashcards.

In 1994 Bishop Belo had advised printing in Australia where it would be less expensive and free from Indonesian military surveillance or interference. So the production of the literacy programme books began in a workroom in St Marys western Sydney. As the demand increased a printery in Dili was engaged, but after the 1999 violence printing there became impossible.

When Josephine Mitchell returned to Dili in December 1999, she found that ninety five percent of all schools had been burned and therefore all the *Mai Hatene Tetun* teaching materials destroyed. The opportunity was taken to re-edit all books in the programme.

By July 2006, tens of thousands of *MMETM* publications were being printed in Thailand by UNICEF. These books were then to be distributed to eight hundred Government and Catholic schools. On October 17, 2006 the new Tetun curriculum, to which *MMETM* staff had contributed, was launched on behalf of the Ministry of Education by the then Prime Minister, Mr José Ramos-Horta.

Teacher Inservice Training

MMETM has assisted teachers to develop their skills through inservice training under Josephine's direction. Teacher workshops began in 1997 and became more established in 1998. In 1999 there were plans for workshops in the Aileu, Ainaro, Same, Likisa, Ermera and Baucau districts, to include teachers from a total of forty-four schools. Given the violence preceding and following the referendum which was held that year, not all of these took place, but the pattern had been set and in the following years the training sessions increased in number, attracting many teachers. Lessons in Tetun had been limited by law to two hours per week and many teachers were either untrained or poorly prepared to handle a new approach. Their pupils had been taught to read by the traditional method, progressing through alphabet-syllable-word recognition and vocal repetition of these, whereas the *Mai Hatene Tetun* programme involved strategies of whole language teaching, leading to understanding of meaning, word recognition and development of oral and written language.

Sister Josephine's efforts have been rewarded as the *MMETM* team of trainers grows, young Timorese people all well-trained in the *Mai Hatene Tetun* method and in great demand from school communities.

Rebuilding of Schools

Sister Josephine has led *MMETM* in contributing substantially to the building, furnishing and maintenance of school buildings following the destruction of 1999. The school communities of Dare, Bedois, Bessilau, Lauana, Maulau, Atabae, Bimaraen, Fatubesi, Raimerahei, Aidabeleten, Same, Oelulan, Padiae, Remixio, Welaluhu, Ermera, Oe-Cusse and Balibo were supplied with roofs, toilets, furniture, verandahs, teachers' rooms, ceilings, water tanks or classrooms which involved years of Josephine's fundraising and her skilful direction of those involved.

Health Education

With Sister Josephine's constant encouragement and fundraising, clinics conducted by the Carmelite Sisters at Motael, Maubara, Bobonaro, Maubisse and Bebonuk have been supported. Practical support has also been given to Maria Dias's clinic at Becora, clinics established by Sr Lourdes, the Catholic Hospital at Suai conducted by Sisters of St Paul de Chartres and the Community Clinic at Bairo Pite conducted by Dr Dan Murphy and to a number of Carmelite nursing students. One of the ongoing practical contributions of *MMETM* has been the production of Tetun health books and charts for use in clinics and schools.

Solidarity

All the justice issues regarding East Timor are in one sense complex, involving historical realities, cultural differences and international relationships which cannot be dismissed as easy to understand or to balance against each other. In another sense, though, the issues are simple, if respect for human dignity is regarded as the basic principle of thought and action.

Josephine's unswerving stance for justice in these matters took the forms of representations to Government, co-operation with other community groups, public and private prayer, letters to newspapers, radio and TV appearances, attendance at rallies, support for the Timorese community, and through discussing the issues with a variety of social groups, including schools.

In 1997 many of the Timorese support groups in Sydney began to meet together each month, a practice instigated by Josephine Mitchell. She explained that the gathering were "a way of focussing on common areas, gathering the energies of the groups to move forward in solidarity, to look at the big picture, to share information and hopes for the future and to look at what could be done in a practical way." (Minutes of first meeting, 20 May 1997).

This group continued to meet at the Province Centre of the Sisters of St Joseph at Croydon until independence was achieved by the East Timorese people. Groups represented were: East Timor Culture Centre, East Timor Relief Association (*ETRA*), 2/2 Commando Unit, Christians in Solidarity with East Timor (*CISSET*), Timorese Student Resistance (*RENETIL*) Australians in Solidarity with Indonesia and East Timor (*ASIET*), Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (*STARTTS*), East Timor Justice Lobby (*ETJL*), Fretilin, Australia-East Timor Association (*AETA*) and the Red Cross. Committed individuals also attended from time to time. Josephine's ability to bring together such a disparate group for such a long time, providing a platform from which each could work for Timor according to their own lights but in congenial association with others attests to her leadership and her commitment to the development of all people, both the oppressed poor and those who work with them.

Of particular importance was the depth of prayer which accompanied the journey. *MMETM* members were always strengthened by the faith of the Timorese people, faith which was expressed quietly and doggedly. The prayers and Masses organised by people including Josephine Mitchell were occasions for so many supporters to come together to support the Timorese. Large demonstrations often occurred in conjunction with these, organised by an array of conscientious human rights activists with whom Josephine and *MMETM* staff were proud to march.

Support for Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Those who escaped from the oppression between 1975 and 1999 seeking refuge in Australia faced a variety of Government responses over many years. Josephine worked tirelessly for individuals and families who had well-founded fears of returning to Timor, all of whom eventually became citizens of Australia.

Josephine was involved with the "Sanctuary Movement" where Sister Kath O'Connor RSJ initiated a grassroots effort wherein thousands of Australians declared their willingness to harbour these Timorese people if they were threatened with deportation.

During those years Josephine constantly provided practical support to families suffering enormous pressure. She was responsible for tutoring, teaching and arranging placement in schools for students, and provided counselling, pastoral and spiritual care as well as financial support for many people.

Susan Connelly
20 July 2011