

# A welcome return

For many missionaries, returning home from living abroad can be more difficult than going overseas in the first place. **Mags Gargan** reports on one group working against 'Reverse Culture Shock'

**"I**T is now recognised that re-entry shock is more severe than the shock of meeting a new culture for the first time. You may have some knowledge of how Ireland has changed, but do not realise how much you have changed. Friends and family expect you to be the same," says Marie-Therese Fanning, Programme Manager (Membership and Support Services) in Comhlámh.

Comhlámh is a free support, advice and guidance service to facilitate the return home of development workers, volunteers and missionaries, to deal with reverse culture shock and to assist them in settling back into Irish society. This support ranges from social events to careers advice, information on social insurance, pensions, health, etc and engaging them in the debates in Ireland on development.

## Sharing

Comhlámh believes the most important thing that helps people to cope with their return home is connecting with other development workers and sharing their experiences.

The group organises residential weekends which deal with how to manage the transition, to living back home. During these weekends the common pattern that most people go through on returning home is shared and discussed. Marie-Therese says: "There is an initial high when you get back home and see friends and families, this is followed by a slump period where you



A meeting of Comhlámh members. Inset: the IMU logo



Missionary sisters in Korea

are trying to find where you fit into this new world.

"The job satisfaction of working abroad would have been very high and sometimes it is difficult to find the same degree of happiness when they return to Ireland; the same sense of self-worth. What else can give them that? Perhaps they need to

accept my job isn't going to give me everything and look elsewhere."

Sr Dymna Travers, who spent 35 years teaching in South Africa, took part in a residential weekend in Cork. "I found the course fascinating and very helpful. The people there told their stories and how difficult it was to adjust. But they were gone for two years. They asked me 'what was it like after 35 years?' It was lovely to share. It was a beautiful event. I loved every minute."

## Teaching skills

"I also got a lot of help. I was looking for something to do with myself and they gave me the idea that I could use my teaching skills here." Sr Travers now provides talks on climate change to school tours in the Ecology Centre in Wicklow.

Comhlámh provides services to about 200 development workers each year and about 10% of them are returned missionaries, who are the largest group of Irish overseas development workers.

According to Marie-Therese the transition period is particularly difficult for missionaries. "It takes missionaries longer to adjust, because they have been abroad for much longer and because often the reason they come home is out of their control e.g. taking care of a sick relative. They may not be delighted to be home and can go straight into the

slump. Their transition is much more difficult."

Fr Eamon Aylward, the Executive Secretary of the Irish Missionary Union (IMU), agrees that the culture shock on the return home can be very difficult for missionaries. "It is harder to come back then to go over. They are now coming home to a completely new country. It is like a foreign country."

"Another difficulty is; what will they do when they get home? It is hard to fit into the Irish Church after being in the Church overseas, there are different ways of celebrating and they have to adapt."

The IMU runs a Returned Missionary Office as a general back-up service for religious orders that offers practical advice, such as how to apply for a medical card, and special Welcome Home Days, workshops, retreats and counselling services.

The IMU refers returned missionaries to Comhlámh for help with more complicated issues such as social insurance and pensions, as returned missionaries, who have been abroad for long periods of time, can have difficulties in securing benefits.

Marie-Therese is keen to point out too that helping missionaries to reintegrate also has a value for Ireland. There is, she says, a value in what they bring back. "We are all the richer for having the missionaries and we don't want to lose all the lessons they have learned. People respect their opinions. I couldn't speak highly enough about them."

"Their level of involvement in the local communities that they have gone to. Their own growth has been enormous, the energy they bring and the hope in their eyes, I think it has brought out the best in them and we are all the better for having heard their stories and it is important that we remember their stories."



Sr Dymna Travers (centre) in Cape Town with members of the Catholic Biblical Foundation

## IRISH TEMPERANCE LEAGUE GRANTS SCHEME

THE objective of the League is to promote an alcohol-free and drug-free healthy lifestyle by the advocacy of total abstinence from alcohol and other dangerous drugs.

THE League offers financial assistance by way of grants to voluntary, community and self-help groups that share this objective.

Details of the Scheme and application forms are available from:

The Grants Secretary (ITL)  
c/o 43 Finaghy Road South  
Belfast, BT10 0BW

The closing date for receipt of application is 15 May 2008