

## YOUTH

# Beyond all borders

A group of young people from the Focolare in GB attended Genfest 2018 in Manila in July. **Rhiannon Copeland** and **Conleth Burns** report on this international event.

**Beyond All Borders:** The challenge accepted by the 33-strong 'Team GB' representing the Focolare Movement in Great Britain at Genfest 2018. Genfest is the biggest gathering of young people in the Focolare and happens every six years. For the first time ever, this gathering happened outside Europe and was hosted by the continent of Asia. Team GB travelled to both Vietnam (Ho Chi Minh City/Saigon) and the Philippines (Manila) for their Genfest experience.

In Vietnam, they visited projects where the Focolare Movement is partnered with other organisations and received a unique insight into their valuable work and the rich Vietnamese culture. The GB Team joined one thousand Y4UW (Youth for a United World) in visiting 16 different Focolare communities across Asia and experiencing first-hand the difference that these partnerships between the Focolare and other organisations are making.

In Manila, the young people from Great Britain joined 6,000 young people from over 100 countries for the three day Genfest in Manila's World Trade Centre. The three days were filled with music, dance, testimony and, above all else, the challenge to go beyond all borders together.

Sharing this Genfest story is a difficult task. It would be easy to fill this article with standard 'Focolare-isms' about unity and love without properly understanding their meaning. It would be easy to paper over the cracks

and avoid sharing the moments of frustration or anger. It would be easy to give to readers of New City, a 'predictable' account, based on reports that we and others have written in the past about trips like this.

To do this would be an abdication of the call to authenticity that was and is central to the challenge of going 'beyond all borders'. Our aim is to share an account of Genfest that is both authentic and thought provoking.

## Vietnam: Hope through frustration

When we arrived in Vietnam, we were unsure of the purpose of this 'pre-Genfest' experience. The social media campaigns preparing us for the trip, centred on the main Genfest experience in Manila. When we arrived in a sweaty and humid Ho Chi Minh City airport, we did not really know why we were there, nor did we foresee the profound impact that these days in Saigon would have on our group and our Genfest experience as a whole.

For a week, we based ourselves in Bình Duong (just north of Saigon). The days would be spent learning about the work of the Focolare there, joining in with some activities, sampling the delicious food (one chopstick fail at a time) and learning about a country and a people indelibly marked by the scars of war and conflict. Everyone had their own highlights: crawling through the Ben Dinh tunnels used during the war; bargaining and bartering in Saigon's central market; hopping on the back of a moped; perfecting the best chopstick holding technique or watching impressive Vietnamese dancing.

What we shared was the relationship built among us, as Team GB, and the relationships we built with the young Focolare Community in Vietnam.

Coming from a country where we queue for everything, stop at the red light, proceed at green, pre-Genfest was an important chance for us to learn and experience the demands of going beyond all borders. Beyond the



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humidity, fatigue and often-changing plans, there were deeper issues that really challenged us as a group.

Gender bias was one of these challenges. The women had to cover up a lot more than men, as they were advised that it was the duty of the women not to become a distraction for the Vietnamese religious etc. The men and women of Team GB found this a really uncomfortable experience. Going beyond all borders required a balance to be struck between respect for ours, and the others' values. We suffered during this week on issues like this, but we also learnt from them.

Our discomfort only scratched the surface when compared with the challenges of some of the young women we met in Vietnam. Some of the women in Team GB were asked to deliver a 'hygiene workshop' to a group of teenage girls from a local orphanage. These girls had received no sexual or menstrual health education and had no access to sexual health supplies. Maya Conway,



who helped lead the workshop called it the 'most hopeful' and 'most frustrating' experience she had in Vietnam. Frustrating because 'why hadn't it been done already by other people?,' hopeful because 'these young women now had the knowledge to pass it on to others.'

Why were we there? Were we making an impact? These questions were widely debated by those of us on the trip. The damaging effects of 'voluntourism' have been widely reported. Whenever posing for photographs with the children, many felt uncomfortable that they were falling into this 'voluntourist' category.

Perhaps, we should have expected this? Our impact was always going to be limited when we only had a small number of workshops with just a few projects over the week.

These concerns were mixed with hope. The Focolare in Vietnam has long-standing and sustained partnerships with each of the projects we visited. The re-

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relationships between the Focolare Community in Vietnam and the staff and volunteers in the projects were evidently strong and well-developed. When we touched down in

Ho Chi Minh airport, we didn't really

know why we were there. When

we left, we had to be honest that

we hadn't changed the lives of the children in Binh Duong.

However, we realised that the young people in the

Focolare Community there in Vietnam

would continue to be active and make

an impact.

The most important

lesson of pre-Genfest was

to take any expectations we

had and throw them out the window. We left knowing that if

we wanted to go beyond all borders in our communities and in society, ex-

actly the same thing has to happen.

Pre-Genfest in Vietnam was a wake-up call that was needed and appreciated as we boarded our flight to head to the Genfest in Manila.



Photo: ©Lorraine Reade

### Manila: One square metre at a time

When we boarded the Cebu Pacific flight to Manila, we were one, big exhausted team. We arrived at 4am, weary-eyed and fully aware of the 8am wake-up call to go to Tagaytay, Focolare HQ in the Philippines. Luckily, Bhan (Silvano Soliveres from the London Focolare) joined us and having lived in Tagaytay for 20+ years, he knew the best places to eat, the most instagrammable landscapes and the must-sees in the Focolare Community there.

Sitting on the ridge above the Focolare's centres, looking over the Tall Volcano Island and lake, we were provided with a much needed space to think and reflect. Martin Scullion, a teacher from Scotland, reflected: 'travelling to a place 6,500 miles away made me see the importance of working towards positive changes in my local community.' Dominika Jagoda, a student from London, was challenged to reanalyse her 'approach to life, religion and relationships with people.' As a group, the moment in Tagaytay allowed us to process the challenges and opportunities of Vietnam and our hopes for the days together in Manila. On the way back to Manila, we stopped in a karaoke bar. A geneRAVE and a rendition of our (overused) team anthem 'We Shall Be' concluded this important hiatus between the two legs of Genfest.



Photo: ©Connie Richards



## Welcome

A sea of colour, flags, music, laughter, clapping, dancing and long-awaited reunions greeted us when we stepped off the bus on day 1 at the World Trade Centre. Welcomed by such energy and diversity filled us with a great sense of hope about what we could achieve together. The beauty and vitality of Asian culture would shine throughout the entire programme. The Asian Culture Night on the first evening was breathtakingly impressive with music, dance and song from across the continent. The whole team was left with the impression that we were lucky to be part of this first Genfest outside Europe.

The three-day programme encouraged a conversation about how we could go beyond all borders. It was an invitation to take this message as a personal challenge and discover what it could mean in our own local area. The interactive 'Explo' ran continuously throughout Genfest. The 20-minute artistic exploration provided the opportunity to think deeply about the beyond all borders mission and our place in it. The programme showcased experiences from all over the world of overcoming borders of all shapes and sizes, buoying the 6,000 young people to think about what they could achieve together post-Genfest. Disillusioned by the ever-increasing violence in El Salvador, Jaime Sayas started 'Operation Square Metre' focusing not on what they couldn't do, but what they could do. They started with transforming a local park, created a community that visits the elderly regularly and an institution that provides shelter and food to homeless people. He asked those at Genfest: 'what if we start by changing our own square metre?' (see page 9)

An experience from Scotland resonated deeply with the members of our group. Siobhan Coyle, a management science graduate from the University of Strathclyde, moved to the Philippines in 1998 to work for a business committed to the Economy of Communion. Siobhan was tragically killed in a plane crash while working there. A musical and dramatic tribute to Siobhan inspired all those present in the World Trade Centre. In her diary, at the centre of the dramatization, Siobhan wrote 'only those with great Ideals make history' and made it her vision to give the 'ideal of Unity to every person I meet'. Siobhan will continue to inspire all young people committed to making this world a more united place.

An overwhelming theme of Genfest was that our re-



Photo: @Sivano Soliveres

sponse to this gathering must be grounded in tangible action. The action required to achieve this ideal of 'Beyond All Borders' was discussed in 200 workshops that ran simultaneously across the city of Manila on day 2 of Genfest. They focused on realising this theme in everything from architecture to politics, health and wellbeing. The workshops were followed by the 'Hands4Humanity' project when 6,000 young people crossed the city to take part in symbolic acts of social action in feeding programmes, coastal clean-ups and street theatre performances. While its practical impact was limited, the project again invited us to think about how we could act post-Genfest in our own communities and local areas.

## Going forward

Maria Voce (President of the Focolare Movement) used her speech at the end of Genfest to urge all those present to get behind the 'Pathways to a United World' initiative launched as part of the United World Project during the Genfest. She told those present that the project would thrive if those present: loved, shared and started again!

In October 2018, our Genfest Team GB will gather with other young people involved in the Y4UW and Hombre-Mundo projects for a 'United World Project' weekend in London. This planning weekend will aim to work out the pathways we will explore here in Britain as part of the United World Project and properly launch this initiative in Great Britain. We'll have an update on this weekend in a future edition of New City!

We want to thank all those New City Readers who made the Genfest experience possible. Without your support and that of the whole Focolare community of Great Britain, our experience simply would not have been possible and as enriching as it was. We hope you will join together with us as we seek to put what we learnt at Genfest into practice with United World Project GB. 🍀

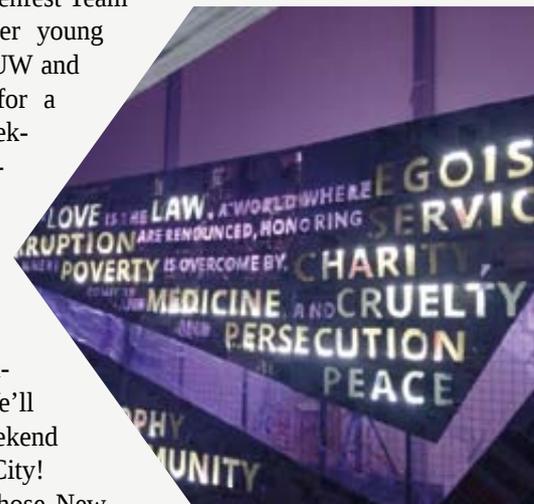


Photo: @Maya Conway

