

The Good Shepherd Learning Centre Phuket, Thailand

Sr Lakana is a Thai Good Shepherd Sister who has been working in South East Asia for 27 years.

Five years ago, she was asked by the Province Leader to move her work from the Hands of Hope project in Nongkhai, to the popular tourist destination, the island of Phuket in the South West of Thailand.

Over 5.3 million travellers flock to the island each year to soak up the sun and experience its scenic beaches from the comfort of multinational hotels. The luxurious resorts are built so that guests need not venture outside their walls. As a result, most visitors to the island are oblivious to the reality of life for many. The minimum wage in Phuket is 300 Baht per day – equivalent to AUS\$12 a day. Minimum wages apply to those who are legally working in Thailand.

In Phuket, Good Shepherd are working with the most marginalised, mainly migrants from Burma. For the Burmese migrants who are legalised, they can only work for one employer and so are wed to the conditions that employer provides. Those who are not recognised legally must negotiate their own arrangements with their employer/s and therefore, do not have any entitlements to a minimum wage.

There are around 200,000 Burmese living in Phuket, many of whom have been trafficked by unscrupulous people smugglers presenting as 'agents' who lure their clients with the promise of employment and a better life on the beautiful island.

When they arrive, workers and their families are dumped, left unemployed in the heart of the fishing district with a mounting debt to the 'agent' and without legal status to work in Thailand. They are forced to work to prop up the burgeoning construction and fishing industries which offer dangerous work conditions and paltry wages.

To add to their woes, the migrants must rent out overpriced and crowded rooms in the district which is often targeted by corrupt police who demand protection money or an offer of credit in lieu of protection money and the threat of deportation if it is refused.

The two debts and the high rent render Burmese workers and their families ripe for exploitation by their employers and landlords. They are left with no opportunity of escaping what will now become an intergenerational cycle of disadvantage.

Four years ago, Sr Lakana arrived in Phuket. She immediately went to the fishing villages and ascertained the three highest priorities for children:

1. Legal status so their parents could no longer be forced to pay bribes for them to stay.
2. Care for children to keep them safe while their parents worked.
3. Education to provide the opportunity to escape the poverty that has entrapped them.



My family and I visited the Good Shepherd Learning Centre, Phuket. We had the pleasure of sharing a meal and playing games with the beautiful children who make up the school community. Their ability to instantly make fun was a joy to experience. They sang us songs, revelled in games and could delight in water fighting as much as any child. When Sr Lakana took us to the village the children came from, we were completely unprepared to witness the deprivation they endure.

We drove into the village around 3pm, just after the most intense heat of the day. It was still sweltering at 34 degrees. As you opened the car door, you were hit with the humidity and the pungent smell of fish drying in the afternoon sun on row after row of trestle tabling. The workers walked up and down the rows, some with babies on their backs, to turn the fish and dry it evenly.



As if it wasn't hot enough, all day long, the workers stoke a fire and keep water boiling to cook the next batch of fish in preparation for the drying process.



Children are often left to care for themselves in the hazardous area as their parents have to work.



At this village, workers earn in accordance with the amount they work. One blue barrel holds about 30kg of fish which must be boiled and then dried. Once dried, it will weigh 10kg. The worker will be paid around 30 baht (\$1.15) for the bag of fish.



The landlord of the village determines the quality of housing those who work for him will live in. At this village, the housing is particularly degraded. The landlord's value of human life over material possession is evident. His employees and their young children live in this row of rooms with an open sewer running through the middle of it.



Meanwhile, his oven that dries fish for export, receives a proper roof and concrete walls to shield the equipment effectively from heat and rain.

Over the five years, Sr Lakana has worked to build the acceptance of the community. She showed us the 5 stages of 'school' she has set up to get the Learning Centre to where it is today:



Stage 1:

First lessons were held in the dwellings of the workers. Before long, the rooms were not large enough to take all the children who were interested in learning.



Stage 2:

The Landlord granted Sr Lakana the use of the last room in the village for her first classroom.



Stage 3:

The lessons continued to grow, Sr Lakana was delighted to be granted some basa blocks and a square of concrete and the tenants in the village helped her build it into a classroom.



Stage 4:

The school community grew exponentially and it was temporarily relocated to the Good Shepherd migrant resource centre which provides skill workshops, nursing aid and residential accommodation to trafficked women and Thai women who have fled exploitation or family violence. This got the children out of the fishing village, but, there was no room for classrooms or play and it was too small to provide a positive learning environment.



Stage 5:

After much fundraising and with the assistance of some business contacts, Sr Lakana was able to build a suitable school that provides education to up to 150 Burmese and Thai students. The students receive English, Thai and Burmese language lessons and the school works closely with the Thai Ministry of Education so that students are able to be integrated into Thai schools. The school is also working towards accreditation with the Burmese authorities so that graduates can have their qualifications recognised in Burma and can attend Burmese universities. In 2015, Sr Apinya joined Sr Lakana to assist with running the school. They are supported by an English expat community and a number of volunteers, many who volunteer to work with the service as teachers for months at a time.



It was a wonderful opportunity to see what Good Shepherd is achieving in Thailand. The strength of connection between client and Good Shepherd; and “*Friends of Good Shepherd*” and the Sisters and clients, was as tight and special as the connection that is experienced here at Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand. Both clients and supporters alike return to visit and remain part of the Good Shepherd community. Around the world Good Shepherd is where others will not go, Sisters and mission partners are working audaciously for those in most need. The assistance being provided is both necessary and deeply valued by the community.

Despite the difference in our cultures, the ethos and charism of Good Shepherd does not waver. The importance of the individual is at our heart, there can be no better confirmation than the smiles and laughs of the children at the Good Shepherd Learning Centre, Phuket.

Each year, Sr Lakana has to raise \$150,000 to continue educating and caring for students at the Learning Centre. Any help from Good Shepherd mission partners would be greatly appreciated. To donate to Good Shepherd Learning Centre, Phuket, Thailand please go to the website of the Good Shepherd International Foundation and follow the links - <http://www.fondazionebuonpastore.org/>

Submitted by Ina Mullin