

Papua New Guinea Reflections Michael Church

Pastor at Our Saviour, Warrenton



There is one song that you will hear, for certain, if you visit among the Lutherans of Papua New Guinea. It begins Long marimari bilong God, i salim Jesus, which in the language Tok Pisin means “In the mercy of God, Jesus came.” I cannot say how often I heard it sung or simply repeated in my head, as we traveled with our new friends.

The New Guinea Islands District, our partner synod in the ELC-PNG, consists mainly of two islands, New Britain and New Ireland. They are beautiful places, from the jagged green mountains dotted with bright tropical flowers to the white-sand beaches and glittering water of Kimbe Bay.

The beauty can be deceptive. Consider the palm-oil plantations, planted in neat parallel lines along the highway. They are pretty to look at, but they pose a moral conundrum. Our traveling companions, a pastor and three laypeople, shared their own ambivalence about the palm-oil industry with us. On one hand, plantations provide the most reliable source of jobs and even housing that most people have ever experienced. On the other hand, the work is difficult – twelve-hour shifts, six days per week – and the pay is meager, even by local standards. Do they help the people survive or trap them in lives of poverty and exploitation?

We talked about this with our friends and partners, as we bumped along the worst roads known to humankind, and those conversations – moral deliberation in the light of the Gospel and its concern for human dignity – were themselves reminders of why global companionship is an important part of the Church’s life. We are joined, not only by doctrinal confessions, but also by our shared desire for a better world.

In the mercy of God, Jesus came, says the song; and it goes on: bungim yumi aninit diwai Kros – so we meet beneath the Cross. And it concludes: Yumi kam bung wantaim, we come together; we become family – the family of God.

