



Building for the Future

There's a saying that nothing is for ever, and when you live in a remote setting that certainly holds very true. Many people come to work in remote communities only to leave again within a year or two. It's not for everyone and there is no question that it takes a certain type to not only live, but flourish in a community so foreign to your own culture. Isolation also takes its toll and it's not uncommon for people to come for a relatively short period before leaving.

In many cases it's not necessarily a problem, more a part of life in the area, but it does have an effect when it comes to missionary work of any kind. These days there is a lot of shorter term missionary work carried out and whilst it can be very beneficial, there is a work at a deeper level that can't be rushed. In a cross-cultural situation it takes time to build a relationship and it takes time for the real deeper trust to be formed with the local people, especially when they have seen so many outsiders come and go. However once that relationship is established then there is a wonderful foundation to build something really worthwhile for the future. In order to do that it takes people with a more long term view of things, such as the family we are about to meet.

The Petts are a family of four: David and Jenny and their two teenage sons Graham and Jonathan. David is the Operations Manager for Arnhem Land, check and training pilot, and also pilots regular flights from the Elcho Island base. Elcho is the largest Aboriginal community in Arnhem Land with a population of over 2000 people, so it is a busy place. Elcho has been home for them since the middle of 2006 and there are no immediate plans for that changing any time soon.



For David & Jenny the MAF journey started back in the UK with a desire to serve God overseas and with David knowing that God wanted him to learn to fly even though he didn't know why! The reason soon became apparent however and MAF became the destination of choice. Even so it was neither a quick transition, nor a straightforward one, and Arnhem Land was not originally where they envisaged going. But, as many of us know, we have one plan and God has another! So, with two children on the verge of the teen years and high hopes, David and Jenny arrived in Arnhem Land at the end of May 2006 and almost immediately moved to Elcho.



Living in a remote community brings its own challenges and one of the big ones is what to do about education. In this case the answer has been home schooling which has been the domain of Jenny. Originally using their own approved curriculum, the boys are now distance education students and the end of this is in sight. It is not recorded who will be the most relieved when it happens – Jenny or the boys!



Apart from that the boys have a full life with both a mowing and dog care business amongst friends and also a range of other activities, which includes learning to drive in a very different environment .

The whole family have also immersed themselves in most aspects of church life, which include frequent preaching for David, Bible study groups for men and women, technical support, Sunday School and hospitality. Since 2006 they have also had a stall in the weekly market where Christian resources are sold and funds raised to

support local Christian work. The whole family has a part in this.

In seven years they have also built up a number of very good relationships which have included some special times; for example the Djambarrpuyngu Bible dedication in 2008 when the local language Bible was launched. This was the culmination of over 30 years work and opened a whole new dimension for the local people. Then there was this year's annual Thanksgiving celebration to mark the anniversary of the Revival, which Elcho experienced in 1979. On another level, one memory in particular stays with them from the time they visited a Yolngu family at the other end of the island and discovered a surprise with an unwelcome visitor in the house; it's not everyone who can say they found a crocodile in the bathroom!

So what is it about a longer term stay in these areas that is so important? In order to understand this, we need to know a little of the history of Elcho and the outside world. In times past there have been missions and other Christian organisations on the island, but when these groups were advised to leave in the seventies it left a void. The local people had developed a relationship with the missionaries not only in spiritual terms but also economically and in ways of practical help. When the missionaries left, it created a hole in their lives on several levels, which they were unable to do much about. Ironically, the new policy of 'self-determination' took away more than it promised, further alienating the Yolngu as they saw the control of their own lives slipping away and in its place an unhealthy dependency on outside government agencies. It left many people without a rudder in life and today's society has some serious problems with drugs and alcohol.



In order for there to be a difference to the life pattern that has developed, David and Jenny see an absolute necessity for a spiritual awakening transforming society one individual at a time. Jenny puts it this way: " *We strongly believe that without transformation of individuals from the inside out, no real change can take place for the society as a whole.*" And there have been some very encouraging signs that this is happening with a significant number of young people



coming to Christ in recent times. Now these young men want to help others in their path towards wholeness, and it is in their support that David and Jenny see a lot of their value.



It will be the local church that makes the difference in Elcho Island, but it is equally true that in remote areas the local church cannot rise to the need without support, encouragement and resourcing. The Western Church as a whole has a huge amount of resources and teachings, but it does not translate readily into the local culture. What is needed then is for people to take the resources and work alongside the local community to help them absorb the Christian values into the local culture, to train and see them released into the power of God in their own way. And none of this can happen until the people are prepared to trust and then receive the support.

One of the facts of life in Elcho is that the non-indigenous population is constantly changing. Teachers and social support, medical and government staff are forever coming and going and it is hard for the Yolngu to adjust to a new set of faces every so often. It also works against any sort of deeper relationship and trust - after all why bother when the person is only temporary anyway? So if the trust is going to be built up and the relationships established, then it stands to reason that it will need someone with a longer term mindset who is actually going to stay around and stand with the Yolngu and not only be in their community but actually be part of it. This is what David, Jenny and the boys have done; Elcho is not just where they are stationed, it is their home.

True equipping of the local church will only come out of longer term relationships where the trust and appreciation is mutual and where people have proved their commitment to each other. It needs people like David & Jenny, Graham and Jonathan who are prepared to make their home with a different people, grow with them and learn to develop the long term relationships that are the bedrock of the growth of the church. It is not always easy, and it's not for everyone, but it is for them. The Pett family will, for the foreseeable future, continue to transfer skills and responsibilities to Yolngu and to help them take charge of their lives both in the natural and also the spiritual. What they are doing now is building into the future of the community and the local church. Whilst they are having an effect now, the full value of it lies in the future. Some things simply take time and commitment to come to fruition, and David and Jenny have given both, and the Elcho community will be all the stronger as a result.



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