Father Antony Plackal and the SSSMILE Village, Kerala, India

Father Antony Plackal is well known by Canon Bill and several other parishioners. Canon Bill, parishioners and the friends of parishioners have visited the SSSMILE Village. Father Antony comes to the parish every two years and speaks at Masses and to the children of our parish family school.

Please read on to discover more about the work of Father Antony Plackal and the SSSMILE Village in Kerala, India.

What is the SSSMILE Village?
The SSSMILE village – SSSMILE is the acronym of Sacred Scriptures’ Social Message into Living Experience – is the brain child of Father Antony Plackal, a member of the Vincentian Congregation. The Congregation draws its spirit and distinctive character from the life and works, and the Common Rules of St. Vincent de Paul who was chosen as the father and patron of the Vincentian Congregation. The Congregation has taken as its motto, "He has sent me to proclaim the Good News to the poor" (Luke 4:18), which inspired St. Vincent de Paul. In this spirit Father Antony founded the SSSMILE Village to follow Jesus’s guidance in Matthew 25:40 “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.” The pressure of responsibility, having started to build the Village and take in destitute and abandoned residents, must sit very heavy on his shoulders. One of the aims of Saint Joseph’s Epsom: Faith in Action is to help Father Antony and the volunteers that work in the Village with the courage and determination to keep going. Knowing that we are all here helping them gives them great emotional support and we must continue to do it.

At present the Congregation is led by Very Rev. Father Varghese Puthussery, he was elected Superior General in 2005. Father Varghese was a priest here at Saint Joseph’s in Epsom between 1992 and 1994 and is not only a colleague but a friend to Father Bill, who was last in Kerala in 2007.

When did the SSSMILE Village start?
The De Paul SSSMILE Village began functioning on June 13th 2000 in a temporary shed. June 13th was selected as the day of this informal inauguration since it is the Feast Day of St. Anthony of Padua, who is honoured as the special heavenly patron of the SSSMILE Village. The official blessing and inauguration of the first three homes of the SSSMILE Village was done by Cardinal Vithayathil on September 27th 2000, the Feast Day of St. Vincent de Paul.
What is the SSSMILE Village dream?

The Village is designed to have twenty homes for four hundred people who will come from the streets to reside in the Village. There will be twenty people in each house. The people from the streets will include children, young people, elderly men and women, people that are physically handicapped, mentally handicapped, blind, lepers, wandering families, unwed mothers with their children, drug addicts and people that have been abandoned. They are all welcomed to the village where they find shelter, food, medication, love and care and a life of human dignity and decency. Children capable of learning are sent to school outside the Village. Residents are also given opportunities to learn skills to be able to help themselves to become independent.

In the longer term Father Antony has an achievable dream of complete self sufficiency. He hopes to be able to buy some land on which to grow rubber trees. Those residents capable will be trained to tap rubber and care for these trees. The rubber will be sold and the Village will become self supporting. But in the mean time the effort must be in maintaining what is there now.

At the initial stage in 2000 the Village welcomed 10 children and 6 grown-ups.

Where is the SSSMILE Village today?

As of March 2009, there are 7 houses in the Village and about 130 residents, of which more than 40 are children.

Father Antony and the Village recently received a prestigious award from a Hindu organisation based in Kerala. Father Antony was very happy to receive this award as it will help to promote religious harmony.
The Village is in its infant stage and has a long way to go. More houses need to be built for the people from the streets. The Village can only take in people when there is room and there is much demand for room. Facilities need to be created for the people who have volunteered, with no salary or any other remuneration, to serve the Village residents. The daily maintenance of the Village - food, medical care, school expenses for children and many other needs of daily life - require a lot of funds.

The philosophy behind the Village is to be as self supporting as possible. The residents grow a lot of their own food which keeps down costs. A solar panel supplies a small amount of electricity which is used mainly to heat water. The Village has a well from which water is pumped.

Those children that are able attend local schools outside the Village. One young man has recently achieved great success and has been accepted on a course where he is learning hotel management skills and this will enable him to build a life independent of the Village. The local schools are expressing admiration for the achievements of the children from the Village who are excelling in their studies.

The Village accepts help from volunteers that visit from time to time. Anyone can help but medically trained staff are especially welcome. Volunteers help with the care and entertainment of the children, support the infrastructure of the Village, act as drivers, collect shopping and medication and many other tasks that support the Village residents.

As a rough guide it costs about £2000 per month to run the Village, that is to supply all the residents with medication (a major need), food that is not grown within the Village and maintenance of the infrastructure. In other words, it costs about 50 pence per resident per day to run the Village. To us here in Epsom this is not very much at all, even in these times of recession, but for the Village residents this 50 pence means a great deal. One pint of lager will support 7 people for 1 day, a Starbucks skinny latte will support 5 people for a day!! Every single donation, no matter how small, makes a real difference.

What can we do from here at Saint Joseph’s in Epsom?

In our parish we have a core team of volunteers that set up a mission, the initial mission that we named “Faith in Action in India”. This mission, now incorporated into our extended mission “Saint Joseph’s Epsom: Faith in Action” is a focal point that keeps our parishioners and the staff, children and parents of Saint Joseph’s school aware of the SSSMILE Village, raises funds and encourages donations for the SSSMILE Village and communicates regularly with Father Antony to give him support and encouragement. We do these things in the following ways:
Keep them in our hearts, minds and prayers
We help Father Antony and the residents and volunteer helpers of the SSSMILE Village by keeping them in the parish consciousness, and therefore in the prayers of our parishioners and the prayers of the staff, children and parents of Saint Joseph’s school.
Father Antony regularly dedicates a Mass to give thanks for the support that the Village gets from Saint Joseph’s parish family.
We have an article on “Saint Joseph’s Epsom: Faith in Action”, and particularly the SSSMILE Village part of this mission, on our parish web site. The article includes photographs of the Village and its residents

We regularly publishing our communications with Father Antony on the parish web site, in our parish newsletter, on the notice boards in the church and in the school newsletter.

One day, when Father Antony has the technology at his disposal, we hope to communicate with Father Antony, his local support team and the Village residents, on a more regular basis.

Raise and remit funds.
We raise funds to support the maintenance and development of the SSSMILE Village and its residents and volunteer helpers. All money that is raised is sent to the bank account in India that has been set up for the Village. Our parish mission “Saint Joseph’s Epsom: Faith in Action” is a “point to point” mission. That is to say that every single penny raised gets to the residents of the Village. There are no administration or handling charges, there are no politicians involved, there are no charity handling, advertising or administration charges. Just us giving DIRECTLY to them. This is a critical part of the philosophy of “Saint Joseph’s Epsom: Faith in Action”.

How do we do this?
We hold large fund raising events two or three times a year. Examples are the two very successful curry evenings that were organised by our original Faith in Action in India mission in 2008.

In future we will be giving everybody the opportunity to make regular contributions to the “Saint Joseph’s Epsom: Faith in Action” and we will strive to make these donations eligible for Gift Aid.
We collect one off donations that come in all the time. Some examples of these; a married couple from the parish walked the entire 500 mile length of the Camino de Santiago de Compostella raising over £3000 in sponsorship – what a fantastic achievement, a lady in Epsom - not a Catholic - takes voluntary donations for surplus fruit and vegetables that she grows on her allotment, the parish In Touch Group have raised funds by baking and selling cakes, some parishioners that have suffered bereavement have asked that contributions in memory of the deceased are given to our mission. Our Lenten Hunger Lunches also support our mission. We are blessed with some very generous supporters who have made significant and regular donations. These supporters are not necessarily parishioners and not necessarily Catholics.

Communicate with Father Antony.
We have two way communication with Father Antony on a fairly regular basis and usually via e mail. Unfortunately Father Antony only has access to a dial up connection in the Village so “bulk” communication, e.g. photographs and technologies such as SKYPE are not possible at the moment. Communication with Father Antony gives him strength, gives his colleagues and volunteers strength and gives the residents of the Village strength. It shows them all that there are people that care very much for them and will help them, despite the great physical distance between us. Father Antony regularly sends us e mails describing life in the village, what they are achieving and what the donations collected through “Saint Jospeh’s Epsom: Faith in Action” are being used for in the Village. These e mails are attached, verbatim, to the parish newsletter, displayed on a notice board at the back of the church and included in the school newsletter.
We encourage people to visit Father Antony and the SSSMILE Village if they are in the area in India. Father Antony and the Village residents are very good hosts and love to have visitors.

Here are some photos taken by a visitor to the SSSMILE Village, a young graduate from Sheffield University who visited in 2010. She stayed in the Village for a month and had a wonderful time. If you would like to see more please go to the parish website.