Learning peace in the Solomon Islands
The 2010 International Formators’ Conference

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The ‘Community Routes’ of January 2010 reported on the first C/SSF International Formators’ Conference which had been held in New York and Boston in the summer of 2009. That meeting marked the start of a series of events to bring together from across the world those concerned with the initial formation of our sisters and brothers, and in July 2010 a group of us met together again, this time in the Solomon Islands.

Beginning and ending in the capital, Honiara, we spent most of the time staying as guests of the brothers at the large and stunningly beautiful rural house of Hautambu, La Verna, and meeting too with their next door neighbours at Little Portion, also known as 'the farm': It was from there that the meat for our feasts and other meals arrived, as well as the extra diesel-generated electricity, paid for as a luxury and convenience for several hours each morning and evening during the conference. It was also at Little Portion that we occasionally joined in the volleyball and football which are part of the timetable in these youthful SSF houses.

In the middle of our conference, by way of a group-building exercise and a chance to see something of Melanesian village life, we 'canoed' across a choppy but azure blue sea to spend a night on the Island of Savo. Our memorable visit began on that island with the wonderful village welcome, similar to that which the brothers had arranged for us at Hautambu; 'warriors' first challenging us before children garlanded us with flowers and the village catechist, a tertiary, made his welcoming speech. That was followed by a hair-raising hike up the route of a washed-away path and an ever hotter stream to the caldera of the active volcano which forms the island. On our return we enjoyed a wash in water from a well on the beach - the geothermal heat giving us our only 'hot shower' in three weeks - before our feast with the villagers, after which we shared together something of our lives and stories. We joined them too for Sunday Mass in the church before our return across the sea.

Apart from that night, we spent the whole time on the main island of Guadalcanal, but even Hautambu was for many of us one of the most remote places we had ever visited. So why there?

Well with its abundance of enquirers, postulants and novices Hautambu is a good place to think about formation, but it was also because the previous year the brothers in the Pacific had invited the rest of us to come and see for ourselves what life is like as an SSF brother in that part of the world, as we thought about our life in a post-colonial context. But we also did so because we wanted to reflect on our Franciscan calling to be Instruments of Peace and to hear first hand about the literally 'front line' work that our brothers had been engaged in during a recent time of unrest and civil war, 'The Tension', that afflicted the country for several years just a decade ago.
For the first week of our conference two Australian facilitators led us in an intensive journey through all three workshop levels of the 'Alternatives to Violence Project'. The next part of the programme was more 'home-grown' as we discussed how to use the early stories of Francis as sources for peace and reconciliation. Bishop Terry Brown was with us that week, and explained the background to 'The Tension', but most movingly several local brothers spoke directly about their own experiences during that dangerous and frightening time as they placed themselves between the warring parties, befriending and praying with both sides in turn, or as they navigated their little boat far out to sea and back again to bypass the roadblocks which isolated them and other local people from the important source of various supplies in Honiara. The story best known in the UK perhaps is that of seven young members of another Anglican Community, the Melanesian Brotherhood, who were tortured and killed in 2003, and we visited the graves of those 'Seven Martyrs', now commemorated in the Church of England Calendar, but it was clear that our SSF brothers had also made an important contribution at significant personal risk to that vital work of reconciliation.

To learn first hand from the brothers themselves in the place where these recent events actually happened was reason enough for our journey, but the experience of living the gospel life together in the context of one of the most beautiful but underdeveloped nations on earth is one that will probably help to form our attitudes and Franciscan vision for years to come.