

Fragile East Timor Economy Boosted By Australian Pentecostals

Two Assemblies of God churches in Sydney are aiding the nation in the aftermath of devastating ethnic violence.

When the citizens of the fledgling nation of East Timor, northwest of Australia, voted overwhelmingly in August 1999 for independence from Indonesia, they paid the ultimate cost. Indonesian forces made a scorched-earth withdrawal, murdering Timorese and pillaging property of all value. Much of the land, including up to 90 percent of the capital, Dili, was left in ruin.

In the wake of the devastation, two Assemblies of God churches in Sydney, Australia, have linked with a Christian-aid agency to help bring relief to the traumatized nation. Though both churches plan longer-term missions involvement there, economic revival is an urgent priority. Michael Murphy, senior pastor of Shire Christian Centre, found a community in shock on his first visit to East Timor a month after the vote.

“The devastation was like nothing I’ve seen before, and the way the East Timorese had been pillaged was very spiteful,” he said. “I walked through many of the homes, and even the [water] pipes had been taken. Every last bit of value had been ripped from the homes.”

In October 2000 Shire joined Sydney’s largest church,

Hillsong, in a fund-raising run that brought in \$50,000 to help the East Timorese economy. Among the runners were 30 paratroopers of the 3rd Royal Australian Regiment, who, along with other Australian Defence Force units, carried out a highly acclaimed peacekeeping deployment in East Timor.

Shire and Hillsong work closely with Sydney-based Opportunity International Australia, a Christian overseas-aid organization that manages the funds raised. Opportunity's "micro enterprise development" program offers small business loans to the developing world's poorest people. Opportunity staff survived an office bombing and so far have helped more than 600 East Timorese build businesses as diverse as fishing, tailoring, carpentry and hairdressing.

Among the beneficiaries is Ana da Silva, whose story typifies many. When pro-Indonesian militia burned down her home and hairdressing salon in Dili, Ana and her family fled to the harbor, where, with thousands of others, she begged for a boatlift to safety. There the militia singled out her teen-age son, falsely accused him of belonging to the resistance and murdered him before her eyes.

Eventually returning to Dili, Ana's business assets amounted to a crimping iron and a hairdryer. A first Opportunity loan of 5 million rupiah (\$550 U.S.) enabled her to rebuild her salon, and with a second loan she bought hairdressing chairs and hair products. Up to 90 percent of loan recipients are women, said Simon Lynch, Opportunity's managing director for East Timor and a Shire congregation member.

"In East Timor there has been a lot of loss of life among the male population, but we've also found out over time that the women often carry the brunt of the poverty, and generally the

money that's earned in businesses run by women tends to get spent on the family," he said.

Opportunity's clients are organized into "trust banks," groups of up to 30 who are asked to co-guarantee each other's loans. They meet regularly to make repayments and receive training and mentoring. The default rate, Lynch said, is less than 1 percent.

Marketing manager Nicole Partridge said Opportunity aims to give the needy a "hand-up," not a "handout."

"Loans help them establish responsibility and accountability for the money. If they want to expand the business and get a loan from a local bank, they have a credit rating—we can give them references."

Like Murphy, Hillsong's senior associate pastor Jonathan Wilson has made several visits to East Timor and has spoken with loan recipients. Pleased with the benefits flowing through Opportunity, both men are now thinking beyond economics.

"We've been looking at starting a church plant in Dili, possibly an English-speaking service. Many of the people want to learn English," Wilson said. "We would be looking at something that would reflect the heart and spirit of Hillsong Church."

Hillsong Church, known for its worship songs, had held seven previous fund-raising runs, enabling Opportunity to fund 35,000 small businesses in Ghana, West Africa.