

Speaking Notes for Fr. Alan Hilliard, Director of the Irish Bishop's Commission for Emigrants at the Irish Australian Community Support Association of Queensland (IACSAQ) in the Irish Club Brisbane on Monday the 4th of September 2007

I am delighted to be here this evening to address this gathering of Irish people in Brisbane who are interested in supporting Irish migrants. In a strange way your objective is to be idle! We do not wish to have situations and circumstances where Irish people will need your assistance. However the truth of the situation is that we have a lot of Irish people travelling up and down the east coast of Australia and circumstances do arise whereby people will need a helping hand. We also note that Brisbane is a city that is expanding. Many Irish construction workers are travelling from Sydney to set up new homes for themselves and this new influx will create a demand for support agencies like IACSAQ.

I ask you not to underestimate your importance. Last year the UN estimated that 160 million people migrated worldwide. Many migrate in search of better futures. Many are welcomed because the economic circumstances of the host country require workers with varying skills and talents. The objective of any migrant care organisation is to make migration a more positive experience for the migrant.

Those who travel today are thought to be considerably more sophisticated than those who arrived in Australia in the 1950's and 60's on the 'assisted passage'. However sophistication does not mean savvy. The fact that one can text and email and stay in contact with people at home means that they tend not to make the same contacts within the local community that earlier emigrants saw as very necessary in order to obtain work and to be supported in life. Today it is possible to be 'translational' and have your life lived in two countries. In the past county associations met and shared information about happenings at home. People put the bits of information together about births, marriages, deaths, festival and catastrophes from the various sources until they felt they had a handle on life at home again. Today a person in Singapore can hear about a death in Ireland quicker than the next door neighbour at home hears the same news.

However this sophistication may not help a person when tragedy strikes. Love, care, attention, advice and support cannot be made readily available on the screen of a mobile phone. The need for hands on support is vital in the early stages of any difficulty to ensure the situation does not deteriorate. When a stressful situation arises, local knowledge is vitally important so those affected by tragedy can get on with resolving the issues that they face. This is the hall mark of many agencies I am associated with. The support they offer is akin to a kindly shepherd. There is no formula other than human goodness, focused motivation, common sense and a cultural sensitivity that offers support and ultimately makes a difference.

We welcome the support that is available for agencies such as the Irish Australian Community Support Association of Queensland through the Unit for the Irish Abroad at the Department of Foreign Affairs. I know that you have sufficient resources at present to undertake your mandate but as needs change or as circumstances arise you will find within the unit body that will be happy to engage with you. Of course the first port of call is the Embassy in Canberra that helps you deal with more immediate issues. Our office in Maynooth is always happy to offer advice and support directly or via the chaplaincy in Sydney. Working with all our associates means we have considerable expertise and varying templates at our disposal that will be helpful to your committee and your membership into the future.

Many organisations in Australia often complain that they suffer from the ‘tyranny of distance’. Australia often feels like the poor relation with regard to emigrant support. Granted the emigrant populations in the US and Britain are substantially larger in these jurisdictions but it must be said that Irish Australians are held in high regard. Often enough this relationship is not capitalised on by various organisations. The ‘tyranny of distance’ I note exists between the various organisations in Australia. The level of interaction and exchange of views and information could be increased for the benefit of those that we serve. In this regard and with the support of the Embassy, Noreen Bowden of Emigrant Advice Network (EAN www.emigrantnetwork.ie) is facilitating the production of a newsletter between the various welfare and support organisations around Australia. This will hopefully heighten awareness of the great work being undertaken by the various centres and will begin to highlight how the ‘tyranny of distance’ can be lessened. This will also promote better interaction between emigrant organisations in Ireland and Australia which in turn will give much needed support for publications like Emigrant Advice’s ‘Going to Australia publication. (www.emigrantadvice.ie)

As Director of the Irish Bishop’s Commission for Emigrants can I say how delighted I am to note the presence of Bishop Finnigan, auxiliary Bishop of Brisbane highlights the belief that migration and the care of migrants is more and more about host and sending communities working more closely in the service of people on the move. In the face of economic advance we continue to work for the ‘globalisation of solidarity’ and the promotion of human dignity.