

Our team threw a party for outcasts

IMAGINE a village of outcasts, where 23 families of leprosy sufferers live behind eight-foot concrete walls.

One or more in each family has been so ravished by this barbaric disease that, without the help of the nuns from the mission hospital nearby, they would not survive.

Some are blind, some are limble. No-one has a job, there is no water, no electricity and no sewerage. Some haven't been outside the

walls for years and they have never had a party.

So there was apprehension and disbelief on their faces as they entered the mission hospital at Farafengana in a remote part of Madagascar. They were the guests at a party planned by Gosport churchgoers Diana and Ian Dow and a team of cyclists from the charity LEPRO (British Leprosy Relief Association).

"We all ate together rice, chicken, manioc and vegetables, the children trying to use spoons instead of

their fingers and packing away huge amounts of food," said Diana. "We gave out balloons and blankets, buckets and scrubbing brushes.

"Pat got out a guitar and we all danced around the tables – even those on crutches – and laughed with the children. An old man with leather callipered legs stood up to thank us. Then we carried those who couldn't walk back to the trucks.

"The next day we had to move on. We called in at the village to say goodbye. I talked with a gentleman who explained that he had once been a prosperous farmer with his own land.

"He had developed leprosy seven years ago. He held out blackened stumps where his hands should have been and, as I held them gently in mine, he started to cry."

The couple, who go to St Mary's Church in Alverstoke, visited Madagascar for two weeks to see the health education programme being undertaken by LEPRO to prevent the spread of leprosy, and how



Diana and Ian Dow on their cycle ride with LEPRO in Madagascar

medication, and to teach those who have suffered from leprosy for years how to protect their damaged limbs. Thus the average cost to LEPRO of preventing and treating this age-old Biblical disease is just £21.

The 14 members of the LEPRO group cycled from the capital city, Antananariva, 320 miles round the remote leprosy settlements in the south-east corner of the island.

But the rough roads were full of potholes and Diana fell off her bike, breaking her wrist. She rode in one of the jeeps that accompanied the cyclists, handing out baby clothes, rice and soap to the poorest families along the way.

"In every village we came to, we were surrounded by the children of this beautiful country who wanted to hold our hands, touch our white skin or give us flowers," said Diana. "All were ragged and bare-

South Africa for treatment and there was no money. He had to walk away.

"He went to see a lady of 34 who was paralysed from the waist. She had seven children, four of whom had died, while the other three were being looked after by the mission hospital.

"She was very thin, had deep pressure sores, and was in great pain. She had been treated for TB of the spine. Ian wanted to take her blood pressure, but there were no sphygmomanometers. Again he had to turn away. After 40 years in the healing profession, he cried tears of pure frustration at the unfairness of it all.

For Ian, 66, and Diana, 61, who works in mental health, the driving force behind their desire to help those with leprosy comes from their faith. They have previously been to India to help leprosy sufferers there.

Diana, who is now training to become a Reader, was a chaplain's assistant at Gosport Memorial Hospital for eight years, and her spirituality and calling to the healing profession are intimately connected.

"God is concerned about our physical health but he is more concerned about our wholeness," she said. "His healing involves harmony between ourselves and between nations. We want to do our bit to help, using the skills we have."

Find out more about Diana and Ian's trip to Madagascar at a curry supper at the parish centre, Green Road, Alverstoke, at 7.30pm on Friday 4 March.

Tickets, which include a welcome drink, are £8 and can be reserved by ringing the Dows on 023-9252 8122. All proceeds will be donated to LEPRO. Find out more about LEPRO on www.lepra.org.uk

FREE ONLINE SHOWCASE!



Illustrator: Miriam Ginnings

my faith

Diana and Ian Dow cycled around Madagascar, meeting leprosy sufferers in one of the poorest countries in the world as part of their desire to see healing and wholeness

those suffering with the crippling and stigmatising disease are cared for. Madagascar is a beautiful island in the Indian Ocean, but is one of the 10 poorest countries in the world, and polio, TB, leprosy and malaria are rife.

Four thousand new cases of leprosy were discovered in Madagascar last year alone. The government pays for the multi-drug therapy that cures the disease but LEPRO trains and equips paramedics to go to each area and monitor the Malagasy people to find the new cases, to distribute the

foot, all laughed with delight and jumped about at Pat's magic tricks, or the perfume Chrissy dabbed on their wrists, or the soap bubbles that Scilla blew for them.

"Ian, who works at Haslar Hospital in clinical neurophysiology, was asked to see many patients. At Vohipeno, we were taken to the local hospital to see a girl of 14 who had weakness down her right side. She had bad headaches - she probably had a brain tumour.

"Ian asked for an ophthalmoscope, which every GP in England carries, to look at her eyes. There was none and anyway, the patient would have to have been flown to