Congratulations!

You have been given the opportunity of a lifetime; the chance to meet some of the world’s most inspirational people and to explore your place in our vibrant, diverse global community.

Take this opportunity with both hands.

Allow yourself to be truly ‘Immersed’!
What is the Edmund Rice Immersion Programme?

The Edmund Rice Immersion Programme is an initiative begun by the Christian Brothers and further developed by the Edmund Rice Schools Trusts in Ireland, Northern Ireland and England. This project encourages schools in the European Edmund Rice family to connect with Edmund Rice projects, communities, schools and ministries in the developing world and, in doing so, forge relationships of radical solidarity, mutual affirmation and friendship with people made poor.

The emphasis at all times is on “being with” not on “seeing and passing through”.

It is important that people meet each other as equals and take the opportunity to explore cultures, understand ways of life and enter into lasting friendships.

Taking the word “immersion” in its literal sense, it is about immersing into the culture of the host community, living like them and experiencing their way of life for the duration of the visit.

Since the beginning of this millennium, Edmund Rice schools in Europe have provided opportunities for teachers and students to connect with communities in the developing world.

This project, known as the Immersion Programme, reflects our mission as Catholic schools and indeed is a unique and inspirational expression of the Edmund Rice ethos.

This document will give you some idea of what to expect as you begin your journey!

What does the developing world offer Immersion groups?

- A different way of life
- A different system of values, placing ‘community’, rather than ‘individual’ at the centre
- Contact with a world made poor due to a range of internal and external factors
- Challenges of having too much when others have little or nothing
- Personal exploration of life’s priorities
- The presence of God in a world of extremes
- The legacy of Edmund Rice alive today
- Storytelling and listening

Fundraising is not really the aim of Immersion. Allow the focus of your experience to be on how the host community can change you, rather than how you can change the host community!
Why take part in Immersion?

As you’ve been interviewed and selected for Immersion, you will already have given some thought to this question. However, there might be some aspects you’ve not yet considered.

Throughout the Immersion experience, including the preparation and formation process, you will have opportunities for personal, social and spiritual growth. By looking closely at the realities of life in developing countries and being exposed to the injustices and inequalities inherent in those societies you are becoming part of a new generation with a social conscience, a sense of fairness and justice, and a desire and commitment to make a change in the world.

Personal Development

Through the Immersion Programme participants will grow and develop personally through opportunities to:

✓ Work in a team
✓ Reflect on and articulate their emotions
✓ Develop the skill of thinking critically and expressing opinions
✓ Become aware of their own skills and talents, and those of others

Social Development

Through the Immersion Programme participants will:

✓ Develop a generosity of spirit, compassion and friendship with those made poor
✓ Build on their understanding of poverty, human rights, justice and environmental issues
✓ Become aware of their own potential to act on issues of social and environmental justice

Spiritual Development

Through the Immersion Programme participants will:

✓ Be inspired by the life and good deeds of Blessed Edmund
✓ Be invited to be faithful to the teachings of Jesus Christ and to live by gospel values
✓ Be encouraged to grow in their own faith while at the same time respecting and celebrating a diversity of beliefs
✓ Reflect on the meaning of their own lives and on how they can achieve their full potential
Essential Elements of the Immersion Programme

Preparation

The success of an Immersion experience will depend to a large degree on the level of preparation done before embarking on the trip. The group will be diverse and balanced. Each participant must have a willingness to develop their own spirituality and an openness to growth through experience. You will, of course, be accompanied by staff who will ensure your safety but, remember, it is an Immersion for them too!

You will be invited to research the country you’ll visit, and to share your journey with fellow students, your family and friends, and the wider community. You will even get the chance to meet other students from ER schools who will be on Immersion during the current cycle; attending this gathering is a really important part of your preparation.

Engaging with the Host Community

Throughout the Immersion emphasis should be on establishing and building relationships.

Immersion groups are the guests of the communities they visit and need to treat each experience with this in mind.

Your schools and the host communities are equal partners in the Immersion experience and must meet each other on these terms.

The issue of what Immersion means to host communities will be considered at all times during planning and preparation.

After your Immersion, you may be invited to explore how you continue this relationship. This should be done sensitively and in a way that empowers your new friends.

The Itinerary

Your Programme in the developing world will be a varied one, and you’ll definitely be taken out of your comfort zone at some point!

This is deliberate and, remember, everyone (even staff) will feel the same fears and doubts.

Meeting strangers can be intimidating but just be yourself and be open to sharing your story and listening to the stories of others.

The itinerary will offer space for conversation, social outreach, visits to different communities and cultural experiences.

Embrace them all! This is a once in a lifetime opportunity!

Reflection and Conversation

Prayer, reflection and conversation are core parts of the Immersion Programme. It will be the responsibility of your Group Leader to ensure that there are opportunities each evening to reflect on your experiences.

Whatever your faith background, these sessions will be some of the most valuable parts of your Immersion so, although sharing is not compulsory, be brave and open yourself up.

Reflection will give you some much-needed support, will allow you to support others, and is where lasting relationships with your peers are built.

An Immersion without this space for reflection cannot be said to be a true Edmund Rice Immersion!
Essential Elements of the Immersion Programme

You may even be invited to lead a Reflection yourself.

Your staff should bring some useful resources such as candles, speakers, paper, pens and sample material such as poems, prayers and readings. You can use any of this, as well as ideas you might have yourself. There is no right or wrong way to lead Reflection, as long as everybody has the chance to share and unpack their experiences.

A handy starting point for how to plan a Reflection could look like this:

- Set up a quiet space before the group arrives, using music, candles and a focal point
- Start by gathering people in a circle and introducing the Reflection with a prayer, song or reading
- Lead a time of shared silence
- Offer some stimulus material and give time for individual reflection, writing, drawing etc
- Invite everyone who would like to to share their feelings, in no particular order
- Give some time to private journalling
- Lead a period of shared silence and, perhaps, a closing piece

Journaling

You will encounter numerous experiences and a roller coaster of emotions each day, so it is essential that you have time to record these in a journal.

You'll get your journal before you travel and it's yours; nobody will read it unless you want them to. Time given each evening to journaling work will ensure that the memories, emotions and learnings of each day will be kept alive and can be recounted and recovered long into the future. In this way the richness of the Immersion experience will remain with each participant.

Your journal will help you unpack some of the emotions you are feeling and may make sense of some of the hopes and fears that emerge during your Immersion. It also may help with feelings of homesickness which can emerge. This is, of course, perfectly natural. Everyone misses home at some point!

Essential Elements of the Immersion Programme

Return home

You'll feel energised and inspired when you get home, and your Immersion shouldn’t stop there.

To allow the whole school to learn from your experience, you’ll be asked to lead assemblies and presentations and to put together displays to showcase your activities.

Of course, you will no doubt want to give something back to your host community. This can be facilitated by staff. They will help you identify ways to make a difference globally and close to home.

In keeping with the drive across our Network to work closely with Edmund Rice International in Geneva, advocacy, human rights and social justice action will be your tools to achieve this.
Immersion
Timeline

12 Months to Immersion
- 12 Months to Immersion
- 11 Months to Immersion
- 10 Months to Immersion
- 6 Months to Immersion
- 3 Months to Immersion
- 2 Months to Immersion
- 1 Month to Immersion

Fundraising

You should know by now what you have to raise in order to take part in Immersion.

As this is quite a large amount, it can seem quite daunting. However, by breaking it down a bit and helping each other out as a team, you can get there. Immersion is not about getting a cheque from your parents and handing it over! Fundraising is part of your journey.

There are lots of different ways to make fundraising easier. Keep on top of what you have raised and don’t leave it until the last minute.

It would be lovely to think one big event will get you the full amount but, usually, it takes lots of small initiatives to raise the full amount.

If you are struggling, go and speak to your Group Leader. They should have plenty of ideas to get you moving.

Group events

These are good because you can share responsibility for organisation and generally appeal to more people.

The following events have typically worked well:

- Battle of the Bands
- Quiz Night
- Tie Auction (the group writes to famous people asking them to send a tie or personal item along with an autographed note explaining it’s special to them)
- Whole-school events such as sponsored walks can sometimes offer support
Fundraising

Individual/small group events

Working on smaller projects is also effective as profits are spread less thinly.

The following ideas are achievable and can make significant inroads into your target:

✓ Cake sales
✓ Make cards etc to sell at Christmas and Summer Fairs
✓ Car boot sales
✓ Make donation boxes for loose change and give them to friends and family
✓ Present in your parish or to your local Rotary Club/Catenians etc and ask for support

Involve the whole school

An Immersion group is only a very small percentage of the student body in your school.

Lots of others may have applied to go, and others may have wanted to apply but didn’t feel like it was for them.

Be considerate and respectful of this. Prepare for Immersion as if you are going as part of a group representing these people, and all the other members of your school community.

Be willing to engage with students, staff, parents and even local parishes and organisations.

Some will be sceptical of Immersion, so it’s up to you to explain what it means to you and why it’s valuable.

Within school some students can be initially hostile to your group having this amazing opportunity. The way to combat this is to make them feel involved in it.

They can do things like write pen-pal letters and photos for you to take on their behalf.

They should know that Immersion is not a holiday, so tell them what your aims are and get them involved in collecting resources etc.

Of course, when you come back, you can then show them the impact their activities had in the developing world!

Important Stuff!

✓ You will need your parents’ or guardian’s permission to take part, so they will be issued with a Consent Form to complete in advance of the Immersion

✓ You will need a valid Passport and, in some cases, a Visa which will be applied for with advice from your Group Leader

✓ You will need to have comprehensive travel insurance. Sometimes, your school may organise this, but you must make sure you are fully covered

✓ Any medical conditions must be covered by a Doctor who can confirm it doesn’t affect your ability to travel

✓ There are certain health risks associated with travelling to the Developing World (e.g. Malaria, MMR, Hep A, Hep B etc). All volunteers must visit their GP/travel nurse prior to travelling. Please follow doctors’ advice regarding vaccinations/malaria tablets

Each surgery has their own policies/procedures regarding whether their patients have to pay for the prescriptions. Please be aware that you may need to pay for certain vaccinations and that they can be quite expensive

Some of these diseases have a long incubation period so if you feel unwell on return from Immersion; please inform your doctor that you have been in the Developing World

Keep your malaria tablets in your carry-on bag, just in case your hold bag gets lost

Here are some simple tips to reduce the risk of infection or illness:

✓ Wash your hands regularly, especially before eating
✓ Only drink bottled water; NO tap water!
✓ Brush your teeth with bottled water
✓ Do not share water with anyone else
✓ Use mosquito spray and sleep under mosquito nets
✓ Only use fragrance free products
Being away from home can be challenging for us all, and being in an alien environment can make it even harder.

Your staff will understand this and will help with the challenges you face as best they can.

Many aspects of the Immersion are designed to ‘shock’ to some extent, but some practical advice can help you focus on embracing your experience.

We acknowledge that different destinations offer different experiences of poverty. For example, Freetown is very different to Lima, where modern luxuries are available in the city centre. In all cases, Immersions seek to engage with those on the margins. Therefore spending time in shops and fast food restaurants only removes us from the communities we are there to visit.

Each destination has its own story to tell, but we seek to engage with it humbly, simply and with respect for those on the margins.

### Accommodation

Don’t expect luxury!

Wherever you find yourself, accommodation will be basic. That’s the idea of Immersion!

You’ll probably share a twin room with another student, but always of the same gender. Wherever you are, you’ll be safe and secure, although you may not always feel it. However, expect catering to be simple but nutritious, electricity to be intermittent and washing facilities to be unreliable! This is all part and parcel of this unique experience!

### Food and Drink

During your time on Immersion, you will be offered food and drink from various places; be aware of what you are eating and drinking at all times! In most places, only bottled water should be used.

This includes when brushing teeth. It can be tempting to buy fizzy drinks from street vendors, but this is not advised as cans can be dirty.

Particularly in the case of home visits, local food might be offered. Whilst this is usually fine, it is best to avoid the risk of eating food you have not seen bought or prepared.

Politely excuse yourself from accepting it.

### Money

You’ll be told in advance what currency to bring with you. Often, less common currencies need to be ordered at Post Offices, travel agents, currency exchanges or online. Please be aware that this can take a few days.

It is sometimes better to carry Euros, Sterling or US Dollars and to exchange for local currency on arrival. In this case, use a service recommended by the local Christian Brothers and check the quoted exchange rates.

The amount of currency you carry will depend on advice from the Group Leader around planned excursions, meal arrangements etc. In some places, limited souvenirs are available for purchase but, remember, this is not the purpose of Immersion. Taking home mementos of your experience is fine, but don’t go overboard!

Do be aware that ATMs and banks can be hard to come by in some places so don’t assume you will be easily able to withdraw money. It is a good idea for the Group Leader to carry a contingency fund.
**Being in the Developing World**

**Donations**

The group should avoid taking large sums of money for donation to local projects and communities.

Edmund Rice Development has been set up to manage donations to the Developing World and ensure Immersions are not viewed as aid missions either by traveling groups or by host communities.

Often the problems you seek to solve are exacerbated by donations through the wrong channels.

All participants in the Immersion Programme must understand their role as guests of the host community and the local placements.

Participants must be discouraged from handing out gifts to local children in a random manner. This can cause problems in local communities. It is better if, for example, there are school supplies to be donated that they be given to the school principal/project manager.

**Contacting home**

One of the hardest parts of Immersion can be feeling so far away from friends and family.

Often, contacting home can be problematic due to sporadic phone signal and poor wifi.

You should manage expectations of your loved ones in this regard. Reassure them that contact with home will be swift in an emergency and that the Group Leader will have reliable contact back home at school.

Of course, when you get the chance, you can post Facebook updates, send messages and even make calls, but do all of this sensitively and simply.

You will often be asked to give up your phones for large parts of the Immersion as removing the temptation to use them can deepen your experience.

**Moving around**

Getting around on Immersion can be chaotic! You may be asked to use minibuses, public transport, and even water taxis!

You will never be asked to walk or travel alone. In fact, you will usually be in groups, but you’ll always be accompanied by a staff member.

It’s a good idea not to carry valuables and to wear sensible footwear at all times. Stay aware at all times.

Anywhere in the world can be dangerous if you are not being sensible and responsible.

**Behaviour**

Normal school rules in regard to school visits or trips apply.

This is especially important as regards alcohol and substance abuse.

You will be asked by your school to sign a Student Contract which outlines the expectations of your conduct.
Photographs

It is best if, each day, an individual in the group takes responsibility for photography. A facility can then be created to allow all group members to access the images.

Images of the Developing World are very powerful in shaping our understanding of situations. Nevertheless, it is essential that any images used publicly are chosen with great care and with knowledge of current legal prohibitions. Please check with your Group Leader before uploading any images to social media.

Images of a visit to a developing country are an important way for you to report back on your visit.

However, permission must be sought before photographs are taken in schools and for photographs of individuals in host communities. Most people will be happy to have the photo taken, but it is polite to check.

In a large group, it can be quite an imposition if everyone carries a camera.

Please do not use:
- Images which generalise and mask the diversity of situations
- Idyllic images (which do not reflect reality, albeit unpleasant)
- Images which fuel prejudice or portray host country residents in a vulnerable way
- Images which foster a sense of racial superiority
- Images which exploit the vulnerable

What to bring

Packing for the Immersion will depend on the particular requirements of your destination, but some general advice around what to take may be useful. It is advisable to pack as light as possible as, often, the Immersion requires transfer of luggage. You should also limit the amount of valuable items you bring. You should travel in comfortable clothes and sensible footwear, wearing group t-shirts and/or sweatshirts if they are being used.

Immersions often require long flights (sometimes with layovers) which can be subject to delay or cancellation. In case of lost luggage, ensure all required travel documents are kept in your hand luggage.

Travel with a well-organised hand luggage bag that includes the following at all times:

- Passport
- Visa if required
- Currency for country of origin and destination
- Snacks
- Change of clothes
- Medication and required medical certificates (including malaria tablets where necessary)
- Toothbrush
- Phone and charger
- Mosquito repellent
- Journal and pens
- Sunglasses
- Suncream (higher factor than you would normally use)
- Torch (blackouts are common in the Developing World)
- Mains adapter - Check the region you are visiting to ensure you have the right adapters
What to bring

Your hold bag may need to contain resources for use on Immersion. In addition, here is a list of things to pack:

- Snacks - keeping energy levels high is important so cereal bars, nuts, sweets are a good idea. Not chocolate, though!
- T-shirts and shorts - allow for more than one a day of each as clothes get very dirty! Some hotels and hostels do have a washing service, though
- One pair of long trousers and one long-sleeved top (as part of your preparation, you should have been advised on the cultural expectations for clothing. Some countries expect shoulders and legs to be covered at least in some places like churches or mosques. Keep this in mind when packing)
- One pair of shorts suitable for swimming
- Basic First Aid Kit
- Sensible shoes - they should be comfortable and durable as the terrain can be very uneven
- One pair of flip-flops
- Minimise how many expensive electrical items you bring with you. Leaving them in hotel rooms can be a risk, as can keeping them on you whilst moving around

- A small backpack or bag to use each day to carry water, notepad etc.
- Hand sanitiser
- Imodium
- Cap or sun hat
- Money belt
- Work gloves (if your Immersion includes manual work)

Toiletry bag (containing)

- Fragrance free deodorant
- Fragrance free shower gel
- Fragrance free shampoo
- Toothbrush
- Toothpaste
- Anti-bacterial hand wash

It is NOT recommended to bring make-up, perfume or any fragranced product as these can attract mosquitoes.

What to bring

Branded clothing can create a barrier between Immersion volunteers/groups and the host community.

It also identifies you as wealthy and presents the image of a tourist. Therefore keep branded items and fashion accessories to a minimum.

You should pack a few casual and comfortable clothes to relax in at your accommodation. You have more freedom to wear what you are comfortable with during the evenings.

Remember, in some destinations, the evenings can be quite cold!

It is a good tip to mark all the group’s luggage in the same way (with a coloured ribbon for example). Airports can be busy and confusing and easy identification of bags is a big help.
**Post-Immersion**

Your Immersion journey does not finish when you step off the plane on your return. There is so much more you can do to enhance your experience.

Some of this will be facilitated by your school, but some is down to you!

You may be surprised how difficult it is to convey to other people, even close friends and family, some of your feelings about your Immersion.

Very often, participants comment that people struggle to understand Immersion unless they have been there themselves. This is very normal, so don’t worry about it.

The following things might help share your memories and learnings with others, and help you unpack your experiences:

- You will be invited to attend a debriefing session soon after your return
- You will be asked to present to your fellow students through assemblies etc
- You may help put together displays, photo albums, newsletter reports etc.
- Don't forget to send something to anyone who helped you raise the money to go
- A Parent’s Meeting is a great way to help make them aware of your experiences
- A written Evaluation should be completed by each participant

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**Moving on**

This can be a challenge as you will be likely to feel differently after you return. After all, that’s the point!

Your school should help you explore these feelings and talk about what you can do next to retain a link with your Immersion experience.

**This might involve:**

- Reflection sessions in which you explore reverse culture shock
- Group social events so you can stay close to those with whom you have shared so much
- Attending a gathering of all groups from other schools who have been on Immersion during the current cycle
- Exploring opportunities for engagement in social justice and outreach work closer to home
- Consideration of how the Immersion experience is beginning to shape your choices around careers, university, further study, gap years etc.