

Imaging Mercy Today

Closing the wage gap a Mercy issue

Ngā mihi atawhai - greetings to all in mercy! If Catherine McAuley were here today, chances are she'd be encouraging us to add our signatures to a *Closer Together Whakatata Mai* card, launched by the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services as a way of highlighting income inequality in our country. Archbishop John Dew was among church and social service leaders who gathered to support the start of the campaign in Wellington early last month, aimed at seeing the topic becomes an election issue as New Zealanders prepare to go to the polls in November.

Mercy folk will certainly identify with NZCCSS's mission of 'working for a just and compassionate society in New Zealand, giving priority to the poor and vulnerable among us.' The *Closer Together Whakatata Mai* project aims at building a country where the income gap between the rich and the poor grows closer together, not wider apart. The hope is that a public debate about the issue will create a grassroots groundswell to ensure that all political parties will address the need to reduce inequalities in our society, especially those relating to incomes.

Within two decades, New Zealand has gone from being one of the most equal countries in the OECD to one of the most unequal. This has been accompanied by worsening social outcomes: higher imprisonment rates, more teenage pregnancies, rising obesity levels and poorer mental health. Project organizers say the wage gap is growing. As ordinary wages and salaries grow only slowly or even decrease, top executives and management continue to reward them-

selves with handsome pay packages. Most people in New Zealand earn less than the average wage, which is skewed by the smaller number of very high income earners.

Maori bear the greatest burden of the inequality, especially in the areas of child mortality and infectious diseases, mental health, life expectancy, education and imprisonment. Maori children are 23 times more likely than Europeans to suffer rheumatic fever; Maori life expectancy is eight years lower than for Europeans; one in four Maori young people is unemployed; one in four Maori males has spent some time in prison.

Children are most affected by income inequality. Over



ARCHBISHOP John Dew of Wellington, adding his voice at the *Closer Together Whakatata Mai* launch on June 2. (Photo: NZCCSS)

Enough for the needs of all

E Te Atua, rapu i te tika,
God, Justice-seeker,
you love us all equally,
but your special care is for
the poor and vulnerable.

Increase within us
the desire to take only what we need,
to share freely from a bounty you bestow for all.
Give us generous spirits
that reach out to those who have less.

May we learn from Catherine
to believe that you are a faithful provider.
'Let us never desire more than enough;
He will give that, and a blessing,' she says.
No one is poor who trusts in your love.

In the desire to make our country
more equal once again,
help us to show that there is enough
for everyone's needs
when none are greedy. Amen.

200,000 New Zealand children are now living in benefit-dependent households; thousands suffer from preventable infectious diseases. New Zealand has one of the lowest rankings among the 30 wealthy OECD countries for child well-being. Children who have low family income in their first five years of life experience poor health and have poorer long-term outcomes in later years.

Income inequality hurts all New Zealanders, even the most wealthy, says NZCCSS. 'Economic growth on its own will not make us happier, healthier or more successful as a country. It is not our total GDP that counts, but how fairly that income is shared. A more equal country is better for all of us, regardless of how wealthy we are.'

Reducing inequality in Aotearoa could help to make these changes, say project organizers: more than a hundred fewer babies dying in their first year of life; 400,000 fewer people with obesity, and its resulting diabetes and heart disease; 2000 fewer teenage pregnancies, meaning fewer abortions and fewer young mothers struggling with social problems; half the current rate of 8000 people in prison.

Find out more about this project by checking online (www.closetogether.org.nz); sign a *Closer Together Whakatata Mai Choice* card or sign up online. Talk to your MPs, candidates and colleagues about the issue. It doesn't matter what political party you support; taking action to reduce inequality will make a difference to all us. And isn't that what Mercy is really all about today? - Dennis Horton