

# Identity in mission — Mercy or Catholic?

Ngā mihi atawhai - greetings to all in mercy! A one-day gathering of five of us last month, charged with promoting Mercy mission at a national level within our current ministries, soon got to talking about how we affirm and nurture Mercy's identity, especially among newcomers appointed to lead or manage those ministries. What are the key mission tasks of those who take on these roles today? How much of Mercy's story do they need to know, to fulfil these roles? And are these ministries Mercy or Catholic, or both?

It depends, to some extent, on which ministries we're talking about. At its best, there is part of Mercy education which is always concerned with faith formation; and those entrusted with leadership roles in our schools and colleges need to be people of faith. Some of those key roles are designated as 'tagged' positions – open only to those who identify as Catholics and who are seen to be committed to putting their faith into practice.

By contrast, our healthcare and community development ministries are available to clients who seek them, regardless of faith or creed. You don't have to be a Catholic to be cared for at Mercy Hospice or Hospital, or to find a place to live in one of our aged care facilities. Nor do you have to be a Catholic or even a Christian to work in these ministries, so long as you can embrace their core values. And yet, there is a sense in which Mercy's healthcare is an extension of the healing ministry of Jesus, offering a wholeness that neither death nor physical loss and diminishment can deny.

In our community development ventures, Mercy is also offering a vision aimed at enhancing human life and setting people free, regardless of their differences in faith and cultural background. Yet in any talk of what it means to be fully human, spirituality is never far from the topic. Without proselytizing or insisting that one faith tradition is better than another, the invitation is often there for people to

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listen to their hearts and to be in dialogue with the Spirit that moves within, leading to a fullness they could never reach on their own.

It is difficult to tell the story of Catherine McAuley without adverting to her closeness to God and her trust in providence, her desire to see her life guided by the divine compass that lay at its heart. The great gift of her legacy is that it translates into language which fits so easily the inclusive, all-embracing spirit of our times: respect for human dignity, especially the dignity of women and girls, a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, a belief in the power of human beings to change and transform their circumstances. It is not too hard to divest Catherine's spirituality of strands that might bind it to the piety, even the prejudices, of a bygone era, and to join her in searching for that mix of moral goodness and practical skills that make people 'fit for heaven, without being unfit for earth.'

In what sense are our Mercy ministries Catholic, and how is that identity expressed? If it is assessed by church attendance or by the icons on the wall, we may sometimes fall short. But if Mercy is judged by its fruits, as Jesus insists we will be, then the hope is our ministries will pass muster; for through them the hungry and thirsty are being fed, strangers are welcomed and the naked clothed, the sick and imprisoned are visited, and the poor hear the good news that God is always close when they cry.

- Dennis Horton

### Where mercy needs to be today

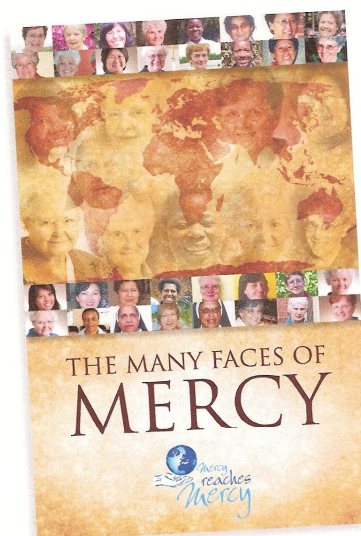
In the Old Testament prophet, we hear God speak:  
'I have heard the cry of my people;  
I have come to deliver them.'

And we know where mercy needs to be today:  
wherever 'the cry of the poor meets the ear of God.'

God speaks, too, in the words and deeds of Jesus.  
He is moved with compassion at the plight  
of all who come in search of his help:  
He reaches out to touch all who have been shut out,  
to draw them into the aroha of God.

In the spirit of Catherine, we seek to be there,  
where the cry of the poor reaches the ear of God.  
As outsiders are drawn into the circle of Mercy,  
mana is restored and manaakitanga shown,  
we find ways to share with others  
the gifts which God has lovingly bestowed on us.

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### THE MANY FACES OF MERCY

This booklet, produced by Deirdre Mullan rsm, is about Mercy women who minister to bring about a better world.

Copies are available at \$5 (including postage) from [DHorton@somauck.org.nz](mailto:DHorton@somauck.org.nz). Proceeds will go towards scholarships for children in the developing world.

