



How will Mercy NZ respond to Tonga's need?

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If there is a silver lining to Covid-19, it is surely the awareness we have all gained in recent months that planet Earth is our common home and that all of us are dependent on one another. Our efforts to keep ourselves and those closest to us secure and well have a global dimension; the world is a safer place when each of us acts with the wider human community in mind.

Events in Tonga last month, following the volcanic explosion and resulting tsunami, have reminded us sharply of our links to the Pacific region. Initial response from our government and defence force has been matched by a huge outpouring of concern and practical support from many in New Zealand, especially from Tongan people living here. Despite the lack of immediate communications, all the signs point to the need for ongoing support, as the people of that Pacific community work to repair the damage to their environment and re-establish their infrastructure for food, water and the other essentials for life.

The tragedy that faces Tonga is one that touches deeply the hearts of the Sisters of Mercy and their partners in mission in New Zealand. Mercy's links with Tonga have grown since 1964, when four Sisters of Mercy from Christchurch went to teach in the village of Lapaha on the island of Tongatapu; over the years, sisters have been involved in various ministries. In recent years,



Tonga today: A youngster stands in front of flattened trees and a damaged building after the recent volcanic eruption and subsequent tsunami. (Photo: Guardian/Tongan consulate).

Tongan-born sisters have worked there in parish ministry, served in the diocesan Office for Justice and Development and directed Caritas Tonga, responsible for development and relief projects. Sisters of Mercy have taught at Takuilau College, a Catholic co-educational secondary school, one of them serving as deputy principal and teacher of English and Religious Education.

Here in New Zealand, Mercy colleges have made a specific contribution to encourage pupils of Tongan descent to know and embrace their culture and to stand tall as young Pasifika women, confident that through Mercy education and values they can make a difference to how they and their families will live. Tongan students at Mercy colleges in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch are encouraged to take part in festivals such as Polyfest, Tu Tangata and Tongan Language Week which celebrate the diversity of Polynesian culture through song, dance and oratory. Parents of these students are encouraged to participate in associations which foster these events.

For the wider Catholic community, Caritas Aotearoa has already announced plans to raise funds for immediate relief and long-term recovery in Tonga. The Caritas website (www.caritas.org.nz) has details of how these plans can be supported; the agency already has direct and well-established connections with Caritas Tonga. Schools with links to Takuilau College may have existing ways for channelling support or may contact the Sisters of Mercy. Mercy's community development ministries will no doubt find ways for responding generously to this crisis that faces their Pasifika sisters and brothers over the coming months.

As many of us are likely to be preoccupied with our own concerns in the face of the Omicron threat, the witness of Catherine McAuley persuades us to consider our blessings in relation to those whose needs are so much greater. Her invitation to Mercy foundations in her day was always to let her know when they were hard-pressed; her promise at that point was that they would 'divide and share.' Our global Mercy community brings the struggle of Tonga and its people very close to home. May the spirit of Mercy grow as the peoples of the Pacific draw closer together at this time.