

Being in mission today — embracing diversity

Nga mihi atawhai – greetings to all in Mercy! There was a time, which some of us may still remember, when nuns in any convent all looked pretty much the same, like peas in a pod. The habit and holy rule worked to create that impression. But not anymore.

It may have been only an illusion. In the days when Mother Superior ruled the roost and a chorus of nuns sang, ‘How do you solve a problem like Maria? How do you catch a cloud and pin it down?’ sisters beneath the coif were probably more different from each other than we might have guessed. But today we see more clearly.

We’ve discovered in recent times that women religious are as unique and different from one another as the rest of us. It’s the human condition, and a reflection of God’s immensely generous love, that each of us is cherished for who we are. The differences that make us unique are important. Perhaps this accounts for why the Sisters of Mercy today, in responding to the question of how they are to be in mission, have answered in their Chapter 2009 statement, ‘In embracing diversity.’ And that’s the resolve we’ll begin to unpack in this month’s reflection.

Diversity can be seen as an obstacle or an opportunity, depending on whether our preference is for order or variety. Creator God seems certainly to favour the second, in making a world that is richly diverse, a creation that unfolds and continues to grow increasingly complex as it does so. The call to understand and care for creation is, more than anything, an invitation to see how we and all other forms of life are interdependent. Insistence on conformity leads in the end to tyranny and destruction. Life is nurtured in the letting-be of being, and in a readiness to welcome difference and variety as a source of enrichment.

Diversity united in love

E Te Atua aroha nui,
God whose love is all-embracing:
through the good news
proclaimed by Jesus,
you bring together
into a single family
people of every nation,
culture and tongue.

Into this you breathe
the power of your Spirit,
that in every time and place
your people may be gathered as one.

Through Mercy’s diverse ministries,
may we witness to your love.
As we celebrate our differences,
may we rejoice also in the unity we share,
and draw others close to us,
that they too may know
that they belong to you,
in mercy’s name. Amen.

*Produced for He Waka Tiaki Mission Team
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Imaging Mercy Today



MERCY FACES 2013: This line-up at a Mercy gathering earlier this year includes Kath Deady, principal of Carmel College, Carol Adamson, St Mary’s College Ponsonby, Ann Coughlan, CEO of Mercy Parklands, and Sister Priscilla Kohlhase rsm, Te Ngakau Waiora Mercy Spirituality Centre

In their decision eight years ago to become one Congregation, Sisters of Mercy in New Zealand agreed to weave together the legacies which had previously made them four separate traditions, hoping that nothing precious in those stories would be lost. Some sisters within the new, emerging reality were accustomed to working alongside non-religious, where Mercy ministries were open to welcoming lay women and men as partners in mission. For others, the works of Mercy had only ever been done by sisters, and so should always be.

Today, governance of Mercy entities is taking some of these into new spheres. A Mercy organisation, set up to meet the needs of struggling women, is initiating programmes for men, helping them to be better partners and fathers, because this is what mothers and children have asked for. Mercy outreach requires that we stretch our tent pegs, to embrace the needs of the vulnerable in South America and the Pacific, even while resources for our own aged and sick seem so limited. A commitment to affirm tangata whenua soon reveals that there are others, new migrants and refugees among them, waiting at the edges of our society for mercy to touch their lives.

Embracing diversity has also meant an expanding agenda. ‘What in heaven’s name has fracking or mining to do with nuns?’ some might ask. ‘Why on earth not?’ comes the response from at least one Sister of Mercy, back home from her immersion in the business of the United Nations, more aware than ever of how care of the planet must be a priority for Mercy today.

What an inspiration Nelson Mandela has been, in his capacity to embrace diversity and see that no one was left out of the mix. ‘Our human compassion binds us the one to the other,’ he said. ‘Not in pity or patronizingly, but as human beings who have learnt how to turn our common suffering into hope for the future.’ May the legacy of his life draw us closer to the future for which he strove so bravely.

- Dennis Horton.