

Te Hononga Atawhai

Mercy Focus

Volume 12 Issue 5

9 March 2011

Mission 'what God does'

Mission is what God does in our world. Our call is to share in God's mission, in what may prove to be the great adventure of our lives.

And the way to get launched is to move from our comfort zones and meet others whose story disturbs us enough to want to change it.

Those are among key ideas of Professor Anthony Gittins, invited by the Sisters of Mercy to lead workshops earlier this year in Christchurch,

Dunedin and Auckland.

Teaching mission and culture at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Fr Gittins says that imagination is critical for a glimpse of what God has in mind. And we have to keep moving, to keep the founding vision in sight.

We build structures to serve the mission; the danger is that structures can become self-serving, and there are times when structures need to fall. What mission needs are

** turn to page 2*

Founding spirit spurs vision for Mercy now

Groups from Mercy community development ventures and schools have begun the year with visits to heritage sites at St Mary's Convent in Ponsonby.

They learnt about the pioneer Sisters of Mercy and the works they founded after their arrival in 1850.

A group of seven from the Ranui-based Te Ukaipo Mercy Initiatives for Rangatahi, including managers and board as well as several staff, was joined by four new staff of Te Waipuna Puawai in Ellerslie for a two-hour session in January.

Their visit began with a ceremony in the small graveyard where founder Mother Cecilia Maher is buried with several of her pioneer companions.

A hiko through the property gave time for briefings on next-door neighbours, Mercy Hospice Auckland and St Mary's College, before an interactive session indoors that featured Mercy minis-



PILGRIMS from Te Ukaipo and Te Waipuna Puawai line up outside the 1866 chapel at St Mary's in Ponsonby with Sister of Mercy Teresa Anderson (right). Two similar visits are planned for later this year.

tries throughout New Zealand and the Pacific, as well as sharing stories of their own efforts to be Mercy today.

The session ended with a visit to the historic kauri chapel, blessed by Bishop Pompallier in 1866.

Schools which visited the same sites last month included teachers and 80 senior pupils from Holy Cross School in Papatoetoe, exploring their links with the Sisters of Mercy who founded their school in 1953, and 140 Year 13 students from Carmel Col-

lege, whose retreat day focused on 'Mercy: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow'.

After a simple ceremony in the cemetery, pupils from Holy Cross School were able to meet a group of six sisters from St Mary's Convent; among them was Sr de Pazzi Hudner, who had served twice on the staff of the South Auckland school.

As part of their retreat Carmel students also visited Mercy Hospice, to hear volunteer coordinator Julie Reid speak about

hospice care, and a Mercy site in Ellerslie to see a permaculture garden, a community development venture and Waiatarua Mercy Parklands, an adjoining aged care facility.

Two more orientation sessions, being planned by the Pou Atawhai Mission team, will be open to staff of any Mercy ministry.

Enquiries about these two sessions, on Wed 13 April and Wed 28 Sep, may be made by calling Sr Teresa Anderson, (09) 360 7878, or emailing TAnderson@somack.org.nz

* from front page

Mission is what God does on earth

strategies – plans to keep the vision alive.

The adventure means a constant reaching out to people who are different

from ourselves. “The more I encounter the other, the more I see of God,” says Fr Gittins.

“If you love only those

who are like you, you’re not really being converted to the other.” If you’re truly looking to someone who is different from

yourself, and who can reflect who you are in a way you could never do for yourself, then you’re onto it.”

Founding stories more than nostalgia

As Sisters of Mercy and their colleagues around the world this year prepare to mark 180 years since their founding, Professor Anthony Gittins has been in New Zealand and Australia to run workshops on mission and discipleship.

In Auckland, he talked to *Mercy Focus* about some of his key ideas on mission and his ministry to homeless women in Chicago that sustains them.

Stories about founders like Catherine McAuley are important, he agrees, especially at a time when so many people have lost their sense of identity.

“Religious communities, especially those founded with a particular vision, need to be able to identify what the visionaries might have imagined if they were living now.

“The founding stories are important, but not as a piece of nostalgia. They’ve got to be mined for the essence of the original charism.

“We’re aware that our founders were considerably more heroic than most of us today. The really critical question is whether there is anybody left today with the same kind of inspiration?”

From Catholic Theological Union in Chicago where he is Professor of Mission and Culture, Fr Gittins says that mission is what God does, whereas the church and its members are invited to discipleship, “the adventure of a lifetime that calls for not less than everything.”

He sees the future of religious Congregations, on which so much of the ministry of the church has depended, as one of the major questions of our time. “I think the answer lies in the imponderables, and the chief of these is a different kind of religious life, a different kind of canonical reality.

“If the welcome of Anglican clergy into the Catholic Church were to presage an increase of women and men, married and single, in a liberalization of dedicated ministries,

then I could see we might get a movement from lay people that brings them together, but without canonical status. But I don’t see any encouragement from Rome.

“Where I do see life is in groups like the Catholic Worker movement and L’Arche communities. I think we’re going to get a very different way of living out an apostolic vocation, one that doesn’t involve an absolutely life-changing separation from the world.



FR Tony Gittins... hopeful, but not optimistic.

“I think it’s going to take time before people begin to realize how that might feed itself into a renewed sense of mission. But I think religious Congregations as we know them have got to die. The next quarter of a century is going to be a very important moment for the institutional church. I think it has a great opportunity, but it doesn’t seem to be using the imagination and creative possibilities that are there.

“It’s all very well calling people to pray for vocations, but that’s got to be integrated into their lives. In-

creasingly, I find that people who are idealistic and really generous are finding alternative ways to use their skills, either outside the church, or within the church but not the Catholic Church.”

Fr Gittins says that each year, some of CTU’s best graduates, especially women, either become Anglicans or Presbyterians or Lutherans, or find themselves working in other churches, because their own church either cannot pay them or doesn’t take their ministry seriously.

“So it depends on whether our church gets wise at the 11th hour, or whether we end up with something that is much more of an ecumenical mix. It’s a bit like predicting in the 19th century what the 21st century would be like.

“I can see a number of possibilities, some of which are dire and some enormously helpful. As a Christian, I believe that hope is a non-negotiable. So yes, I’m hopeful, but I’m not very optimistic.

“I see people like my sister, who’s 20 years younger than me, who in her early 20s was in a L’Arche community. She’s married to a man who is not baptized but she’s deeply, deeply committed and is starting a L’Arche community in Manchester.

“It’s a formative thing for her; her whole life has become focused around finding housing for adult handicapped, needy or impaired people. It’s a concern for the other.

“There are people who take my breath away with their sense of purpose. I have a niece who had a baby when she was 17; my brother and sister-in-law raised the child and supported their daughter through all of this. She’s now the principal of a Catholic school.

“She asked me last year what I was doing in August. It’s our 10th wedding anniversary. Will you come and say a house Mass?’ I said, ‘I’ll be there!’ It’s situations like these that encourage me.”

Stories of homeless women inspire hope

Close involvement with a shelter for homeless women has been the chief basis for most of his theology, says Professor Anthony Gittins, who planned to return as a missionary to Africa after a year of study at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago in 1968.

But after contracting hepatitis from his ministry to street people, he was unable to return to Africa.

"CTU gave me a permanent job, and the street people said, 'since you can't go back to Africa, you can stay with us.' So I did."

Initially, the shelter was in the basement of a Baptist church, with men in one room and women in another. A year later, the men moved to a bigger facility and the women invited Fr Gittins to stay. "So I've been there now for 28 years, as often as I can, on a very regular basis once a week. And for me, it's the ground for all my theology.

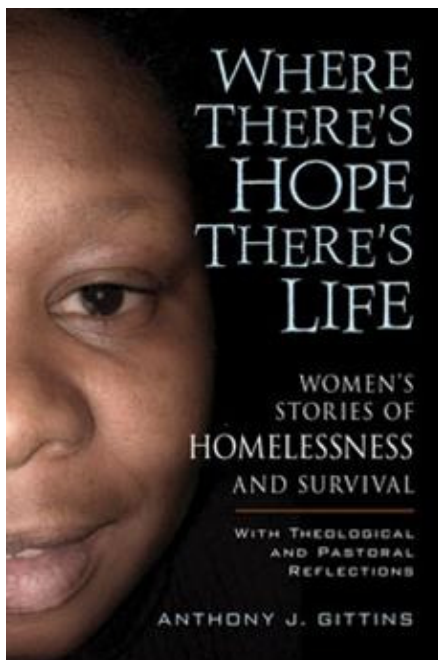
Stories gladly told

"After 15 years, I wrote a book – or rather, the women wrote it. I asked them one night, 'does anyone want to tell me their story?' and they all jumped to state their interest.

"When finally I selected 12 of the women, and their stories pretty well told themselves, I promised to ensure their anonymity, but they wouldn't hear of it. 'We don't want to be anonymous,' they said, 'we want to be known.'

"I had to go back and change it, so that they all got their real names. Many of the women have moved on, some into houses of their own, one or two have been murdered since then. But they all know that this is their book.

"Just a few months ago, I went to the shelter one night, and a woman I'd known from long ago came in



and hugged me. I had two volunteers with me – seminarians I think – and I introduced them to her. Just as I was about to say, 'This is Tina', she declared, 'I'm Chapter One, I'm Chapter One!' They had no idea what she was talking about, but that's how the women see themselves. They've got their story, and it's there."

Fr Gittins recalls that when he started working with people on the streets, he became involved with Genesis House, run for women mostly getting out of prostitution or off drugs.

Genesis founder, feminist theologian Edwina Gately, insisted on the need for a man in the house. "You can't rehabilitate these women, who hate men so ferociously, if they don't have a man they can trust."

"A Franciscan and myself used to take it in turns to stay overnight for three or four times a week. We'd be there cooking, part of the

house. I was there for about nine years; the other half of each week I spent with my community.

"One of the things that became obvious in those years was that I would meet women in Genesis House one week, and the next I'd see them in the shelter, or vice versa; so there was a lot of drift. And it struck me that if they saw a face that they had seen somewhere else, it was OK.

Men accepted now

"Now they call me Fr Tony; I've risen in the world, and I'm safe now. But in the early days, they'd say, 'it's OK; it's Tony.' I can go there any week now, and some of the women will be new, but the others will say, 'it's OK, it's Fr Tony,' and there's never a problem.

"I told them a few weeks ago that I was going to Australia and New Zealand. Apart from the fact that they all want presents, they want to know when I'm coming back. And I said, 'as soon as I'm back, I'll see you again.'

Fr Gittins says he has an adopted family, with a grandson who has come to the shelter at Christmas every year since he was 14. His older sister has just had a baby, whom she brought to the shelter this last Christmas.

"So it's now gone into the third generation. Every year they ask, 'Are we coming to the shelter?' And I say, 'I'm not asking you; you tell me. Are you coming to the shelter?' And they say, 'Yes, we're coming!'

"So we always start off there the night before Christmas Eve; then I drive with the family to Grand Rapids where they live, and we have Christmas. But every year now, the shelter is the focal point. That's their discovery."

New block honours over 50 years' service

From page 4

At first this involved book entries in 14 different accounts. She oversaw the introduction of computers and the creation of a single account. "With 14 different books, I nearly went crazy," she recalls.

Costing around \$3 million, the new

Sister Loreto Building will be formally blessed at a ceremony on March 12 by college chaplain Monsignor Bernard Kiely.

Sr Loreto already has a school house that bears her name; she is in a distinguished group, with Mercy pioneers Cecilia Maher and Bernard

Dickson and Dame Sr Mary Leo to keep her company.

But she agrees it makes an appropriate link with Carlow from where the first Sisters of Mercy came to Auckland in 1850, and where years later she boarded as a secondary pupil at St Leo's School.

'A best start for every child'

When new mothers meet Plunket nurse Jacqui Miles these days, they often ask how many grandchildren she has.

"It's my grey hair, I guess. I tell them I'm not married, that I'm a Sister of Mercy and that I live with other sisters. The conversation goes from there."

A Plunket nurse for over 10 years, Jacqui is part of the Counties-Manukau team based in Clendon, a South Auckland suburb with a wide range of cultures and socio-economic groups. Most of the families she sees are Maori and Pacific Islanders, a large proportion of them Samoan.

The nursing team she belongs to includes Tongan, Chinese, Pakistani, Indian and Afghani, as well as Maori and Pakeha; several are Muslim.

"I had a conversation recently with a colleague, a young Muslim woman. Ramadan had just finished, and I knew that she'd been fasting. We got talking, and she asked about my first call, what led me to become a Sister of Mercy, where I live now, and why I don't wear the full veil."

Jacqui says she has always had a great love for babies, and values hugely the work of parents. Although she has nursed in a variety of contexts – including six years as a theatre nurse at the Mercy Hospital near Whangarei – midwifery has always been her first choice.

She remembers well her first home visit as a newly graduated Plunket nurse in Otara. "It was an incident of family violence, where the mother and her partner had been fighting; she said she had thrown a heavy jar of cream at her partner, who was holding the baby.

"When I walked into the house, there was the three-month-old with a lump



PLUNKET nurse Jacqui Miles... the welcome from families 'is a huge privilege.'

the size of an egg on his head. Luckily my preceptor was there. She offered to stay in the background and leave it to me."

With CYFs involvement, the baby was taken to Starship Hospital. The couple received counselling and support for anger management over the months; the baby was well cared for and the mother continued with Plunket service.

"The result was encouraging and affirming for me as a Plunket nurse. For the sake of the baby we had to step in. This can sometimes create friction and be the end of our rapport with a family – but not on this occasion. It was my first day out on the road, and I remember it especially."

In most cases, their experience is one of being welcomed into families, says Jacqui. "We go on the first visit as a total stranger, yet families obviously value what Plunket is all about and welcome us as individual nurses.

I find that a huge privilege.

"I also recognise my need to respect a family's beliefs. When they do things I wouldn't, I have to get around that in a sensitive way."

Mothers are referred to Plunket by the midwife, ideally four to five weeks after birth. As part of her work, Jacqui assesses the child's weight and measurement, general development and social skills.

"I talk mostly with mothers, but sometimes grandmothers and extended family members, asking if they have concerns about their baby, or if there are any ways of helping them."

Advocacy is a big part of Plunket work, directing families to play groups and kindergartens, helping them to access housing or food parcels. Plunket also refers mothers to agencies that specialize in mental health and drug abuse.

Jacqui remembers a woman with severe post-natal depression. "I didn't recognise it initially, but I've learnt from it since. It took six to eight months, with a lot of support from Maternal Mental Health and other agencies.

"By the time the baby was six months old and I saw him in clinic, the mother was confident and happy and able to enjoy him. Just seeing her grow as a mother, becoming the person she was before he was born, was really affirming.

"It took a lot of patience and time – not just from me, but from the Karitane nurse, the woman's GP, and a counsellor. We worked together with the woman herself, helping to decide what the next step should be. As our Plunket motto says – 'together, the best start for every child'."



Sr Loreto Lennon in front of the new block at St Mary's College that bears her name.

College honours sister's role

A new three-storied block at St Mary's College, Ponsonby, incorporating offices for pastoral care and career guidance, as well as classrooms for art and religious education, is to be officially opened this month, named after a Sister of Mercy who has worked at the college for over 50 years.

Sr Loreto Lennon came to Auckland as a 20-year-old, among a group of 24 young Irish women to train as Sisters of Mercy. She began teaching at St Mary's a few weeks after their arrival, specializing in science and mathematics and gaining a degree in these

subjects from Auckland University.

"Science was always an interest for me at school. I thought I might have done pharmacy or something like that, but was quite happy to start as a science teacher.

"Sr Veronica was teaching maths, and hating it. Languages were her first love, and she was very glad to hand maths over to me." Sr Loreto found it hard at first, because she had studied maths in Irish and had to learn the expressions in English.

She left teaching 20 years ago, to look after the school's accounts.

* turn to page 3