

Eulogy for Mass of Thanksgiving on Sister Mary Elizabeth Mackie OP

Tēnā koutou e huihui mai nei i tēnei rā

It is an honour to be asked to share something of Elizabeth's life in Christchurch with you today. One of Elizabeth's enduring gifts was teaching us how to work collectively- listening to each other and together finding a way forward- and so this offering today brings together the collective voices of many of us who had the privilege to work with Elizabeth during her 26 years in Christchurch.

Elizabeth came to work as the Office Manager for Christian World Service in 1985 and before long was given the responsibility for managing the relationships with groups around the world. Her boss at the time, Brian Turner, was so impressed with her credentials that he told Elizabeth to apply for his job when he moved on. While Elizabeth wasn't keen on taking on this role, she none-the-less played a crucial leadership role in all of her years at CWS. By the time I started working with her at the end of 1993, Elizabeth was working half time managing all of partnership relationships and half time for the Conference of Churches in Aotearoa New Zealand as the South Island fieldworker- and over the next 10 years, she became an important mentor for me professionally as well as a good friend.

In those days, much of the work with overseas partners was quite transactional. Groups would write requesting funds, a small group would meet to make a decision, and the funds would be sent. But Elizabeth was not a simple transaction kind of person; she was curious to know how the project was going and what the group was learning and would therefore write again. And this was the birth of a whole new way of understanding of what partnership meant; it wasn't about money but about relationship and standing together in solidarity with those working to change the world.

John Gould who, together with Trish Murray, worked in the Projects Team with Elizabeth summed her up so well in these words: 'Elizabeth is almost certainly the wisest, kindest and most compassionate person I have ever known. It is hard to even begin to estimate how many lives Elizabeth's lifelong quest to work for the benefit of others must have touched. Her dedicated efforts, directly or indirectly improved the lives of millions, including many of the world's most vulnerable women and children. Most of those she has helped, be they earthquake victims in Haiti, refugees from Sudan, women fighting for justice in India or struggling to improve their family's livelihoods in the Pacific, will be unaware of Elizabeth's care for them. For Elizabeth, this didn't matter, she always gave the credit to the CWS partners on the ground who provided the assistance and saw her role as simply to support them'.

In her work with CWS's partners, Elizabeth was not just concerned about the improvement of livelihoods; she had a keen interest in movement building and the empowerment of people, particularly those most marginalised. She recognised that such work was often not understood by development professionals because it wasn't as tangible as a water tank or a piggery. But it was in the building of movements, that people came to see their own potential, to realise their own humanity and were set free.

CWS's partners saw in Elizabeth a friend who was standing in solidarity with them; not a funder or a donor- but a true friend who cared deeply about the work they were doing and for their families and loved ones.

Gillian Southey, our colleague who remains working at CWS, has been in contact with partners since Elizabeth's passing. Despite the fact that it is now 17 years since Elizabeth's retirement, the messages quickly came back...Lopeti Senituli from Tonga writing 'our indebtedness to Elizabeth for her tireless work at CWS in support of the Tonga Human Rights and Democracy Movement and the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific Movement is immeasurable in human terms.

Damaris Albuquerque from a partner group in Nicaragua wrote 'rest in peace, sweet Elizabeth. Thank you for all you did with CEPAD'.

Jesu Rethinam from the Legal Aid to Women Trust in India said 'It is very heart-breaking to hear this message. We have lots of memorable moments with her. Her first visit, our visit to New Zealand, her sensitive understanding of the team and issues. She was a great inspiration to all of us'.

Manohari Doss, from the Women Development Resource Centre which works with Tribal and Dalit women in India wrote 'she was really a booster to us in making the people to enjoy their rights, justice and gender justice...We pray for her eternal peace. Our hearts are filled with sorrow'.

Elizabeth was loved and hugely respected with partners from around the world. She was instrumental in supporting the Roundtable Process in the Pacific, in Sri Lanka and for the Department of Service to the Palestinian Refugees amongst others, bringing together all of the groups supporting a particular partner or partners so that they could coordinate their efforts.

Elizabeth's packing for her overseas partner visits were testimony to her belief in simplicity. Her bag was always tiny, carrying the bare essentials for what she would need to get through her time away. She had no interest in acquiring possessions, but was pragmatic in recognizing what people needed in order to be able to live a full life.

Always a teacher at heart, Elizabeth took great delight explaining to her colleagues how to wash yourself and then your clothes in just one bucket of water.

As I am sure we all know, Elizabeth had an amazingly sharp intellect. She had a strong structural analysis of the causes of poverty and injustice. Another colleague Mary Cavanagh told me of first meeting Elizabeth in 1981 at the weekly meetings in the Moran Building, to plan the weekend activities during the Springbok Tour. She was in her Dominican habit then so stood out in the crowd, giving a very clear message of what commitment to a religious life meant to her.

In 1990, Elizabeth was active in the anti-racism movement, working with the Conference of Churches in Aotearoa New Zealand, the ecumenical body which brought all of the churches together, and it's Māori counterpart Te Runanga Whakawhanaunga o Ngā Hahi o Aotearoa

to promote Te Tino Rangatiratanga. She was a critical thinker, an excellent listener and was very clear about standing with those who were marginalised by oppressive systems and structures.

Such commitment was also evident in her work with the Beneficiary Advisory Service. She gave strong support to this small, struggling community organisation, providing both the strategic guidance and the infrastructural support that they needed to keep going.

She also served for many years on the Trade Aid Development Committee, bringing her understanding of partnership and commitment to small producer groups around the globe. Her ability to juggle all of her different commitments, and yet give full attention to each one of them was remarkable.

Elizabeth was elected by aid and development organisations in the NGO community to represent them on the VASS Committee- which was responsible for allocating Government funding for development initiatives. She was influential in building an understanding of partnership and her sense of justice and fairness came to the fore as she supported smaller organisations with their projects, enabling them to also be funded.

Elizabeth was also elected to the Government's Aid Advisory Committee in the late 1990s where politicians and government officials discovered that she could be a formidable opponent if obstacles were being put in the way of achieving social justice. She was incredibly articulate, took an educational approach and greatly influenced the thinking in the aid and development sector.

Elizabeth was an amazing communicator- and a legendary story teller. Morning teas at CWS were much more enjoyable when Elizabeth was there! The Conference of Churches in Aotearoa New Zealand, greatly benefited from the beautiful way in which she communicated and told stories. Elizabeth would travel throughout the South Island, meeting with ecumenical groups, leading powerful participatory bible-studies and encouraging people of faith to study together and to work together.

Elizabeth wrote the most beautiful liturgies- which I am sure many of us have participated in. Often with her good friend and colleague Barbara Stephens, there were liturgies prepared for the Anniversary of the Suffrage Movement, for the World Council of Churches assembly in Sydney; for local ecumenical groups or the Christmas worship in the staff office. Irrespective of the occasion, each liturgy was reflective of her deep faith, her love of God, belief in community and the power that communities have when they come together to promote all that is just and good.

Throughout these years, Elizabeth lived with, and was supported by her dear friend Sister Margaret Quinn. Margaret was a good companion to Elizabeth. While they both had their individual work, Margaret active in the local women's refuge, a community house, the librarian for CWS, they shared the ups and downs of life together.

It was after the 2011 earthquakes that Margaret and Elizabeth made the decision to return to Dunedin, to be closer to more of the Dominican family and to share the next stage of their lives within a larger community.

Elizabeth was fun to be around- and people enjoyed being in her company. She had a way of making people feel special. She could relate to anybody, which included engaging my teenage sons in great after dinner conversations when she came for a week long holiday 3 or 4 years ago.

Family was so important to her. She often talked of her siblings, and was so proud of her nieces and nephews. This was clearly evident in that the person she was most concerned to say goodbye to was her beloved sister Anne.

While Elizabeth's passing has left a huge hole in so many lives, she also leaves behind an amazing legacy. Across the developing world there are empowered women, educated children and thriving families – and here in Aotearoa there are so many she has inspired and mentored who will carry on her life's work.

In finishing, I want to thank the Dominican sisters for sharing Elizabeth with us. We were so privileged to have had Elizabeth, who was so integral in your community, as part of our lives and work- and to be invited here today to mourn her loss together. Elizabeth taught us about compassion, being human, humility, the integration of our faith into our daily commitment to social justice, true ecumenism, about community. We are so much the richer for having journeyed with her.

And to Elizabeth, dear friend. May you feel the love that surrounds you here, the gratitude for your companionship, the admiration for a life well lived. May you rest in peace in the hands of your loving God. Amen.

Jill Hawkey

Christchurch Methodist Mission

Former National Director of Christian World Service

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