

WHAKARURUHAU MŌ NGĀ IWI KATOĀ - SHELTER FOR ALL

From almost the day of their arrival in Aotearoa New Zealand in 1850, the Sisters of Mercy have cared for those without a home of their own. The first of these were eight orphan girls, attending the primary school for which the sisters assumed responsibility shortly after their arrival in Auckland. Archivist Sr Marcienne Kirk says that some of these were almost certainly Māori, abandoned as the result of the breakup of relationships common in a port of that time, or victims of family tragedy, illness or war. “By August 1850 there were 18 in the St Patrick’s orphanage and the number grew.”

Wherever the Sisters of Mercy went in New Zealand, the pattern was repeated. In Wellington, there was the Providence, a hostel supported with funds from Governor Grey and his wife, for around 20 Māori girls attending Mercy’s first school in the city. In South Dunedin foundress Mother Kostka Kirby oversaw the building in 1898 of the St Vincent de Paul Orphanage, home for 30 years to over 1600 girls and young women, many of them cared for and taught by the sisters until they turned 21.

As time passed and the level of state-funded social security grew, Mercy’s focus on those in need of accommodation has shifted from the very young to the old and frail, unable to live in complete independence. In both Dunedin and Upper Hutt, a network of supported cottages and apartments provide cheap rented accommodation for older people. In Auckland and Hamilton, Mercy continues to offer residential care to those who need physical, social and emotional support over a range of conditions.

Affordable housing for families has long been a priority for the Sisters of Mercy, since the days when they were first involved in the work of the Monte Cecilia Housing Trust which was set up by the Auckland Catholic diocese in 1982. Today the Trust operates a series of homes in South and West Auckland; a Sister of Mercy still serves on the Trust’s board, helping to keep the original vision alive.

In the tiny Northland settlement of Pawarenga, where the Sisters of Mercy began a mission to local Māori and their whānau in 1927, a house of hospitality continues, supporting families in need of shelter. In the Auckland suburb of Glen Innes, the sisters provided a refuge for women and children throughout the 1990s; from this grassroots involvement emerged Te Waipuna Puawai, a community development ministry aimed at empowering Māori and Pasifika women especially.

Another form of emergency housing is offered by the Wellington Homeless Women’s Trust, spearheaded by Sister of Mercy Marcellin Wilson in 2010, with support from several women from other religious congregations in the Capital. The six-bedroom facility has been fully occupied since it opened; homeless women come from Arohata Women’s Prison, the mental-health wing of Wellington Hospital and from eight referral agencies supporting homeless women in Wellington. “In this Year of Mercy, it’s great to know that doors are open in our city for homeless women for up to three months, as they work to get their lives together once more,” says Marcellin, who serves as the Trust’s treasurer.

Temporary accommodation is provided in their own homes by two Sisters of Mercy in Cobden, a suburb of the West Coast town of Greymouth. After more than 20 years of grassroots ministry, Anne McLaughlin and Theresa Scott find space in their homes where women can stay, sometimes with their own children. The needs range from emergency housing for people waiting for a place from Housing New Zealand, to respite care for those with mental health concerns. “Some stay for a couple of nights,” says Theresa, “another with addiction issues stayed for 10 months. There are a lot of agencies working in the community, but accommodation is still the gap that nobody else provides.”



Sisters of Mercy Margaret Martin and Anne Hurley have lived in the South Auckland suburb of Wiri since 1988, providing a wide range of social services including advocacy on housing issues. Margaret has served on the boards of Friendship House Trust and Habitat for Humanity. Anne has been a member of the NZ Housing Network and the Greater Auckland Housing Collective; she was involved for seven years in the Manukau Housing Scheme. The pair moved to Wiri in response to an invitation from a local Māori woman, and helped to build the house that became their home.

In Christchurch, Sisters of Mercy made a decision within a week of the 2010 earthquake to offer families affected by that event two houses in South Brighton which the sisters had been using as holiday accommodation. A family lived in one of these for three years; the property reverted to a community house for sisters who needed rehousing after subsequent earthquakes. The second house continues to be available for families waiting while their own houses are being rebuilt or while alternative accommodation is being sought.

Finding homes for refugees has become another priority in this Year of Mercy, with Mercy people adding their voices to the call for New Zealand to lift its quota in response to a new global emergency. Since February 190 refugees have arrived in Wellington, where the Catholic and Anglican churches have joined to equip and set up 48 houses for these families. Catholic Social Services has played a lead role in this work, students from Mercy colleges have worked to raise funds to support the project, and a Sister of Mercy is helping young Syrian women to learn English.

Another emerging need is faced by the peoples of some of our close neighbours in the Pacific, like Kiribati and Tuvalu, where climate change is robbing them of the land on which they have until now made a livelihood for themselves and their families. A new category is taking shape, as the world's first climate change migrants seek a new place to call home. With sisters from Samoa and Tonga among their number, Ngā Whaea Atawhai o Aotearoa increasingly feel the call to advocate for the voiceless in the Pacific and to be part of that dialogue, as the cry of the Earth is raised in this new and urgent way.

Taihoa, spare a moment.....

You're invited to conclude this reflection by responding to these questions, prompted by the appeal from Congregation Leader Katrina Fabish rsm for a collective focus by Mercy's ministries over the next two months on whakaruruhau, shelter for all, as a theme for the Year of Mercy:

- *Where does your ministry encounter homelessness in the lives of the people you serve?
How do you feel called to stretch your ministry's tent pegs to reach out to meet this need?*
- *From your experience of working in a Mercy ministry, what particular aspect of shelter for all would you like to bring to the attention of our government and political leaders?*

- **Dennis Horton**

He Inoi: Prayer

The shelter that never fails

*E Te Atua, te Whakaruruhau mō ngā mea katoa,
God in whom all find a shelter that never fails,
let us learn from your goodness to us
to be generous towards those who have less.*

*In this Year of Mercy, teach us to reach beyond ourselves
that others may find a shelter where they may come
to know your goodness as we have.*

Amen.

Produced for He Waka Tiaki mission team.

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