



Mercy remembered – one sister's story

By DENNIS HORTON

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No one knows better the power of storytelling for keeping Mercy alive than Sister Stephanie Kitching, archivist of Ngā Whaea Atawhai o Aotearoa Sisters of Mercy New Zealand.

Her links to Mercy began with three years at the primary school which at that time formed part of St Mary's College in Thorndon. 'We gathered round the sisters who oversaw our lunch and playtime breaks and talked with them. One of them, still alive today, said to me, "You might be a sister one day."'

The pull towards Mercy continued to grow. She enjoyed the sisters and their energies. 'I just loved being where they were. And I also loved the music.' By the time she was 14 she was in the schola, an elite choir of 24 girls, under the baton of the legendary Sr M Winefride Blake, a specialist in bel canto. 'We used to sing at public functions, at weddings and funerals. We sang a lot of Latin hymns; I loved the flow of the language and she always made sure we knew the meaning of what we sang. This drew me into a sense of awe, wonder and mystery in God's presence.'

She entered in 1964. Until the late '80s she was in larger communities, but then moved to live independently, at first alone and then in a cluster of small houses in Miramar with four other sisters as neighbours. 'I remember having to make decisions

for things I'd never had to think about before and realised that this is what most people do. It was a big learning curve.'

Stephanie's active ministries include 16 years in the classroom, seven in adult education and several years as a psychotherapist. Then, while caring for her elderly mother, she began working as archivist for her Congregation. 'Mercy's archives in New Zealand go back to 1850. If you think of our country's social history since then, you can see that our sisters have been at the cutting edge, particularly in education and healthcare, but also in community work, assisting people in areas of great need, through prison chaplaincy, support of refugees and the like.

'Our archives capture a lot of that and hold it for generations to come. If we set up the archives well, others will be able to know and tell that story in times to come. That's important.'

In recent months, Stephanie has been coping with an accident to her knee. 'It's probably been a blessing in disguise, as my body tells me to go at a slower pace and do things in a different way. I'm talking on the phone or by email where before I thought I was too busy to do so. I'm more ready to have a coffee with someone who is upset.' She enjoys time in her small garden, especially tending the Vegepod she won in a competition, and which produces an abundance of fresh greens to share with friends or parishioners at church. 'I see God in nature; the garden is a way of being in touch with the whole of creation. I think gratitude is the basis of a good spiritual life. *Laudato Si'* has woken us up to the small practical things we can do to care for our common home.'

Stephanie has made the transition from being a teacher to serving in a governance role as a director on a Mercy board for nine years and currently



Sister of Mercy Stephanie Kitching with her flourishing Vegepod—'in touch with God's creation.' Photo by Clare Vaughan rsm.

on a Board of Trustees for a Mercy college. 'We have reached the point now where we are handing over completely to lay people. Twenty years ago, this would probably have worried me, but it doesn't now because I see it is working. Those who follow us have caught the spirit and want to see the ministries continue because of the Mercy values that inspire them.'

'There's a whakataukī I often use – *Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua*: I walk backwards into the future, with my eyes on my past. That's important for us as a group of Mercy women, wanting to embed Mercy in Aotearoa New Zealand.'