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New Patches on Old Cloth:
Some New Zealand Catholic lay women’s experiences of overseas mission 1963-2002

Diana Mary Atkinson

A thesis submitted for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (Theology)
The University of Auckland
New Zealand
2006
Abstract

New Zealand Catholic lay women have actively participated in overseas missionary work for over forty years. From the 1960s, the Catholic Overseas Volunteer Organization (COVS), under the auspices of the New Zealand bishops, enabled lay women to respond to missionary bishops’ requests for assistance. Overseas, they worked in a range of mission stations with a variety of religious orders. Their experiences are the focus of this study. Their stories have not been told previously and part of the intent is to make their work visible, particularly, to add to the histories of New Zealand women, Catholic women and Christian missionary women more generally.

This thesis contends that their overseas experiences were far from partnership and collaboration and have subsequently failed to provide opportunities for wider participation in the New Zealand Church.

Vatican documents, archival material, interviews with fifty ex-volunteers and the two lay women directors of the organization provide the data for this thesis. Feminist theology forms the theoretical base and narrative analysis the interpretive tool.

There were three volunteer cohorts: young, single volunteers, mothers with dependent children and older women. Most volunteers grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, came from Catholic homes, attended Catholic schools and were actively involved in New Zealand parishes.

Overseas, the women continued lives of faith and service, contributing needed and valuable skills. Many younger women enjoyed professional opportunities and their missionary community. It was harder to fit in to a mission station as Catholic mothers or older women and many found it difficult to establish a missionary identity, to be accepted as part of the team. In all groups, there was great satisfaction when experiences matched expectations.

The missionary insights and/or skills of these ex-volunteers have generally not been sought by their New Zealand parishes and they are, for the most part, an unappreciated and neglected resource.

Lay women’s experiences of overseas mission point to a need for change – lay women seek not only to participate but to be valued partners in their Church.
Acknowledgements

My first thanks are to the New Zealand Catholic lay women who so willingly agreed to share their stories of overseas mission with me. They generously gave of their time and hospitably welcomed me into their homes. I am in their debt. I would like to particularly acknowledge the two women with terminal cancer who found time for my visit and wanted to share their experiences of mission. Both women died in 2005. This thesis endeavours to honour all these volunteer stories and, by taking a tiny step, works towards the realization of these women’s hopes for a more inclusive and supportive Church.

From a host of people who, in a variety of ways, enabled me to start out on this PhD journey, I would like to thank Dr Judith McMorland who affirmed my plans and challenged me to produce some ‘robust research’. My supervisors oversaw the journey. I particularly wish to thank Dr. Heather Worth who encouraged my first steps; Dr Janet Crawford who gave freely of her time and expertise and guided me through each stage; Dr Christine Dureau who challenged my cryptic comments and provided support and enjoyable interaction to ensure I realized my goals. Dr Helen Bergin generously assumed the role of chief supervisor in the last months and in ways great and small, assisted in this final production. I am very grateful to all these women.

The scholarship provided by the University of Auckland was a boost to my finances and I gratefully acknowledge this support. I also wish to thank Andrew Lavery of the University of Auckland and William for cheerfully providing much needed and appreciated technical expertise. I am also very grateful to Margaret Grigg of the Eugene O’Sullivan Theological Library.

Jocelyn Franklin was unfailing in her support of my work - we had long discussions sharing our understandings of Church; the files she found for me were invaluable for this research. Miriam Broad provided warm hospitality on my visits to her home in Rotorua. We discussed aspects of COVS and she generously shared some of the archival material in her possession.
Many friends supported me during this journey and I particularly want to thank Joan Cardno, Ann Hodson, Annette Bagley, Cheryl Smith and Lisa Wang. The women’s group of my parish community provided on-going friendship and inspiration. My sisters, Pamela Ellenberger and Margret Moors, patiently coped with my being increasingly preoccupied as the process continued. I am hugely grateful for their support and forbearance. I also wish to acknowledge with love, my parents, especially my Dad - he saw the start of this work, but not the end.

It was an extra bonus being able to share parts of the journey with Dr Gabrielle Fortune and the PhD theology students with whom I regularly met as my thesis developed. I am grateful for the support of Professor Elaine Wainright. Dr Allan Davidson provided appreciated on-going assistance in his role as Director of Postgraduate Studies in the School of Theology.

I believe what is worse than doing a PhD, is being the husband of one who is doing the PhD. William’s belief in me, his unwavering support and love, not only enabled me to complete this thesis but to enjoy the journey.
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Abbreviations

AA Apostolicam Actuositatem Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity
AG Ad Gentes Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity
CCD Confraternity of Christian Doctrine
CEJD Committee for Evangelization, Justice and Development
COVS Catholic Overseas Volunteer Service
CWL Catholic Women’s League
CYM Catholic Youth Movement
Dip TESOL Diploma for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
EJD Evangelization, Justice and Development
FMS Marist Brothers, religious order
LAO Lay Apostolate Office
LMHS Lay Missionary Helpers Scheme
LTC Lay Training Centre
MSC Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, religious order
PALMS Pauline Association of Lay Missionaries
PAVLA Papal Volunteers for Latin America
PNG Papua New Guinea
RCIA Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults
SM Society of Mary, religious order
SSpS Holy Spirit Sisters, religious order
SVD Society of the Divine Word, religious order
VSA Volunteer Service Abroad
VSO Volunter Service Overseas
YCS Young Catholic Students

Glossary

Ad Gentes Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity (Vatican II document)
Aggiornamento Renewal
Aotearoa New Zealand
Apostolicam Actuositatem Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (Vatican II document)
Benediction Blessing; a Catholic para-liturgy
Dei Verbum Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Vatican II document)
Evangelii Nuntiandi Evangelization in the Modern World (Apostolic Exhortation)
Gaudium et Spes Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Vatican II document)
Haus Meri Indigenous woman who provides domestic help
Humanae Vitae On the Value and Inviolability of Human Life (Papal Encyclical)
Lumen Gentium Dogmatic Constitution of the Church (Vatican II document)
Mulieris Dignitatem On the Dignity and Vocation of Women (Apostolic Letter)
Pakeha A New Zealander of European origin
Viatores Christi Travellers for Christ: An Irish Catholic lay volunteer missionary association