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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

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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.

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Abbreviations

AA	<i>Apostolicam Actuositatem</i> Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity
AG	<i>Ad Gentes</i> 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	Volunteer Service Overseas
YCS	Young Catholic Students

Glossary

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