

**Marking Elaine Wainwright's Retirement
as Professor of Theology, School of Theology, University of Auckland
15 December**

Elaine – it's a privilege to honour your contribution to the School of Theology and University. Words that keep coming to mind, that sum up what you've given, are commitment, care and encouragement.

Your commitment to the School and University has been unstinting. Invariably you would be the first at work and the last to leave. That was a little intimidating for me in my office down the hall way, but then I could fall back on the excuse that my role was part-time. The processes and demands required by the University were daunting, almost overwhelming for a small unit – but from the very beginning you were meticulous in your attention to detail and seemingly tireless meeting the form-filling demands of the University bureaucracy.

One of the marks of your leadership was your ecumenical commitment, which enabled us to experience collegiality which transcended denominational differences. Although we had been working in the Consortium for some years, you brought us together in ways which promoted and enabled collaborative teaching and strengthened collegiality. That was enhanced by your encouragement to us to come together around food, with your delicious chick pea curry a standout!

Your commitment to contextual theology took seriously a New Zealand voice rooted in this land, with deep respect for Maori; for Pakeha; for the experience of Pacific Islanders and new migrants. Through your encouragement and example we learnt and appreciated more and more the importance of Sophia - feminist voices – the marginalised - ecology and hermeneutics.

Working with you and others on developing Theology 100 was a creative and stimulating exercise. Your course, developed with Philip Culbertson on the Bible and Popular Culture, was at the pioneering forefront of engagement between the Word and the World. As a teacher you modelled this engagement, with attention to theory and praxis. (As a footnote, I was always intrigued by your sophisticated power point presentations at faculty seminars – wondering how I could make diagrams as effective as yours!)

Elaine, your commitment to research and writing was seen in your disciplined approach, setting aside one-day a week for your own work. That was a great encouragement and example (if a little intimidating) for the rest of us. But you also stimulated collaborative research and writing in the School, notably with the book *Spirit Possession, Theology and Identity*. You helped some of us give voice to “Oceania and Indigenous Theologies” in *Concilium*.

Your commitment and participation at the international level of academic scholarship in the Society for Biblical Literature and the Society for Asian Biblical Studies, was both a role model and encouragement to us. You provided both stimulation and great support in helping us gain research funding, attend international conferences and to present and publish our research. The SBL Congress held in Auckland in 2008 was a highpoint and a tribute to your leadership.

One of the greatest legacies of the School from your time as its Head is its students, who now make their diverse contributions in churches, in communities and institutions around the world. Your commitment, care and encouragement to students have been outstanding. You were concerned not only with their academic progress, but also took them seriously as people and supported them through times of personal crisis and sadness. Anne reminded me of your compassion – how she stopped one student who had taken over 50 courses without actually getting his degree from enrolling again, but you gave him another chance and with the assistance of long suffering lecturers he completed and graduated!

Living in Aotearoa New Zealand, Elaine, you became one of us. And yet we know that you had another life across the ditch where your family live. The tyranny of distance, with aging parents and their deaths, brought the challenge of physical separation. But you would sometimes take an early weekend flight to Brisbane to visit your parents in Toowoomba and then a really late flight back and be at your desk attending to the demands of the School. I’m told Elaine, that you are “legendary among your nieces and nephews for keeping ‘genius hours’ - needing little sleep.”

Mary Caygill has sent me some words which speak from her experience of working with you that also reflect my experience. Mary writes about “the seamlessness of the integration of your deep faith, your scholarship, your passion for justice so lived and integrated in the everyday – seen and experienced in the smallest of gestures and the more obvious and public. The

strength and genuineness of your humility combine with your fun and laughter.”

I come from Hokitika on the West Coast, where eight Sisters of Mercy and two Postulants arrived from Ireland in 1878 and established the first South Island Mercy Congregation. Growing up in a Presbyterian household, the Sisters of Mercy I experienced in the pre-Vatican II world were part of “the mysterious religious other”, behind the convent wall, distinctive in their long black habits, white gimps and coifs (I think that’s what they’re called) and black veils.

In the post-Vatican II world I have been enriched enormously by my contact with Elaine who has embodied for me the values of her religious order which include: “respecting every person and culture as unique”; “acting with understanding and sensitivity”; “working together for the common good of all”; “enhancing lives by sharing gifts”. As Mary put it in her email to me – Elaine “lives kindness, enacts mercy, and lives justice ... in her personal faithful living and in the exercise of her scholarship shared for all”.

Thank you Elaine for all that you have given to the School of Theology and the University, to its students and its staff. Giving can often be costly; you have given so much of yourself and enriched others enormously. Thank you.

“Retirement”, as I am finding, is the wrong word to describe what lies beyond paid employment. And so Elaine as you enter the youth of the next stage of your life, may it be for you rich and full of good things.

Dr Allan Davidson

(with thanks to Dr Ann Gilroy rsj and Dr Mary Caygill for their contributions)