



COMMUNITY OF THE HOLY NAME

A history of the Community of the Holy Name,
from 1888 until 2018,
incorporating the
Mission to the Streets and Lanes of Melbourne.





Mission House, Little Lonsdale Street



Sisters Esther, Ellen and Christina, c. 1889

In 1888, the appalling poverty and suffering in the inner-city slums prompted Bishop Moorhouse to set up the Mission to the Streets and Lanes of Melbourne, the first Anglican welfare agency in the city. In the same year, Emma Silcock (Sister Esther), a novice of the Community of St Mary the Virgin in Wantage, England, came to Australia to recuperate from an accident. Asked to help establish the new Mission, Sister Esther realized that God was calling her to form a new Community. Soon after, she was joined by Emma Okins and Christina Cameron. Emma and Christina were initially Deaconesses, amongst the first in the Australian church. This ancient order had roots in the New Testament and had been recently resurrected to enable women to enter a socially acceptable means of ministry.

They lived in an old bakery in Little Lonsdale Street, later moving to Spring Street and gave material aid, such as a free medical dispensary and soup kitchen. They visited women at Melbourne gaol, hosted Sunday services and ran a Sunday school and children's choir and also offered various classes for children, factory girls and young women at risk.



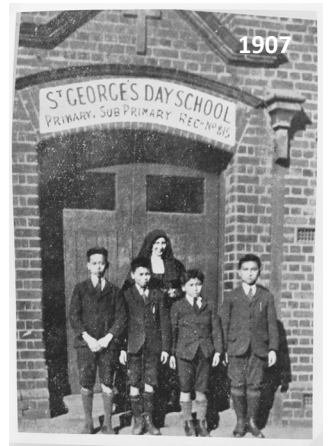
Sister Esther, at play, with local children



Sisters Winifred and Christina at the dispensary



House of Mercy girls doing the laundry



Four boys at St George's School

Drunkenness, violence and prostitution pervaded the streets and the Sisters were concerned for the children and young women. They longed for places out of harm's way where they could minister to them in a loving and nurturing environment . By 1892 the Sisters opened the House of Mercy in Cheltenham, 'a refuge in the country', for women who sought help. Through their work at three children's courts, many young women were sent to the House, on Probation. There, they learnt housekeeping skills and a disciplined Christian life, enabling them to become employable or 'marriage material' when they left. In 1894, they opened a Children's Home in Brighton.

The Sisters were concerned that many babies were unwanted from birth, due to the stigma of illegitimacy, and there were not enough opportunities for adoption. So, they opened up the Darling Babies' Home in 1916 which immediately cared for 46 infants.

The Sisters were also asked to run schools and manage St John's Church Day School from 1906-1921 and St George's Day School from 1911-1925.

In 1912, they were granted a Charter as the first Anglican Religious Community in Australia, the Community of the Holy Name.



House of Mercy girls at sewing class



Darling Babies' Home



St George's Hospital, Kew



Swimming class, Goulburn c.1937

The horrors of two World Wars brought significant challenges to the people of Melbourne. Nearly 40% of all male workers in Australia were enlisted in World War I, with a casualty rate approaching 70%, and many families were left without a breadwinner. Suffering was compounded during the Depression of the 1930's when one third of the workforce became unemployed. There was little government provision as welfare was not seen as their responsibility. The Sisters provided sympathy and practical help to alleviate the homelessness, poverty and sickness of so many.

By 1917, CHN were running two hospitals – St George's in Kew (1912-49) and St Ives in East Melbourne (1917-52), and responded to requests from interstate, managing children's homes across the Hunter Region, and Goulburn.

The House of Mercy expanded, also providing for young pregnant women sent by the Courts, and was significantly upgraded with the latest laundry and sanitation facilities.

In 1913, a much larger Mission House was built in Spring Street but by the 1930's, there was a need for more substantial space, a headquarters of their own, a place where novices could be trained and a retirement refuge for older Sisters. Community House was built, in land adjoining the House of Mercy, in Cheltenham.



Laying the foundation stone of Community House, 1935. Note the market gardens in background.



Sr Maree in Fitzroy 1960s



An OGS Sister from Auckland



Visiting at Fairlea Prison

The Post World War Two years heralded the dawn of fresh ideas. The new Welfare State took on responsibility for the rehabilitation of young women and there was a marked decline in juvenile delinquency. So in 1946, the House of Mercy closed its doors and reopened soon afterwards as the Retreat House for the Melbourne Diocese. This met the growing desire for Retreats which followed the upheaval and stress of the Wars: people sought peace and spiritual renewal in their lives. CHN also managed the Adelaide Diocesan Retreat House at Belair.

Other areas of work opened up. The Sisters ran the new Hostel for the Elderly at Hawthorn East. Camp Pell, in Royal Park, was a housing commission slum of ex-army Nissan huts, nicknamed 'Camp Hell'. The Sisters provided nurturing support for over 80 children, through Sunday School, evening classes, holiday programs and camping trips to the country. In 1970, CHN provided care in Moira Hospital in Sandringham, for physically and intellectually handicapped children.

The Mission House moved to Fitzroy in 1957, where the Sisters tended to the families in the new high-rise flats. The following year, Sisters from the languishing Community of the Good Shepherd in New Zealand joined their ranks. Now there were over 60 Sisters in CHN, dedicated to God and his calling on their lives.



Mission House, Fitzroy, 1961



Belair Retreat House, Adelaide, c.1967



Sr. Valmai, with CV Sisters, c.1970



Holy Name School, Dogura, c.1970

In 1951, CHN was also called to overseas mission, with Sisters travelling to the Australian Protectorate of New Guinea. Their arrival coincided with the eruption of Mount Lamington which killed 3,000 people and left 5,000 homeless. The horrors of the Pacific War were still in living memory of the local people, as the battles fought in New Guinea had been a major campaign, with over 200,000 casualties. However, God had sent hope for the future through the Sisters.

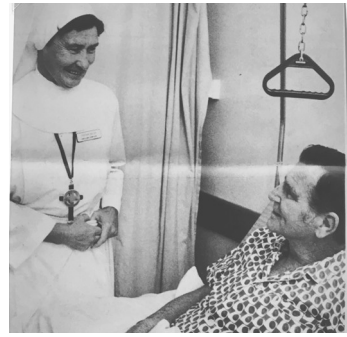
The Sisters discovered that local girls did not receive a secondary education. After much persuasion the Bishop of New Guinea allowed them to set up The Holy Name School in Dogura.

Two girls from this school observed the lives of the Sisters and were attracted to follow the Religious Life. In 1964, with help from CHN, they set up a community that would reflect the Religious Life of the Melanesian culture. The Papuan Sisters formally became known as the Community of the Visitation (CV), ministering to women, children and families.

In 1978, Papua joined with New Guinea to become Papua New Guinea. The expats were given a “golden handshake” and the country moved toward self-government and eventually independence. The CHN sisters helped CV to become self-sufficient, their last year there being spent in an advisory capacity.



50th anniversary of the Community of the Visitation, with Sisters Carol and Valmai, 2014



Sr. Felicity, Chaplain Royal Children's Hospital, 1982-90

Sr. Hilda, Queen Victoria Hospital

The 1970s onwards saw a tide of social and cultural change and the place of the Church was seen by many as irrelevant. Although societal ties to religious organisations loosened, the Retreat House ministry continued to be in demand as more people sought spiritual truths.

Government initiatives and the requirement for professionals with tertiary qualifications changed the ministry of care. Faced with declining numbers, all in religious communities were challenged to prayerfully discern how they might live their commitment to God.

Changes were gradually introduced in CHN. In 1967, the age-old seven-fold monastic Offices recited each day were replaced by a simplified four-fold Office. (The Offices are set times of communal prayer and worship.) In 1970 changes in headgear began a process that eventually led to the abandoning of the traditional habit, leaving the wearing of only the CHN cross and the ring as tokens of Community membership. By 1996, all the Sisters left the Mission House in Fitzroy. As Sisters grew older and moved into other work, they also withdrew from the Retreat House.

There was a move into more individual types of ministry – chaplaincy, Social Work and church pastoral workers – as the new CHN Rule exhorted women to be ‘women of our time for service in the world today’. By 2003, three Sisters had become amongst Australia’s first women priests.



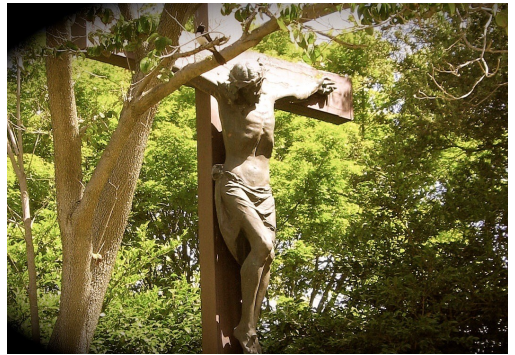
Srs. Elizabeth Gwen & Shelia Anne & guest, 1996



3 priests: Srs. Margot, Margaret Anne & Sheila



Spirituality Centre



Calvary Garden

The 21st century is an age of constant buzz of information technology and social media in our lives. Today's interconnected global society has improved our standard of living but the pace of living is faster than at any other time in history and many people now experience anxiety and stress. Places for retreat, meditation and reflection are needed, perhaps more than ever before, to offer peace and a balance to our busyness. There is a yearning for spiritual life, as more people are asking, "What is the meaning of life?"

With God's guidance, the Sisters decided to build a new convent – Esther House - and use the original one as a Spirituality Centre. This opened in March 2018 for retreats, Quiet Days and guest accommodation. Today, the Sisters' ministry provides a service and models a different way of life, an opportunity to step out of the hectic world, to reflect, pray and be spiritually renewed.

Religious Life is attractive in that it offers something for the whole of life but it is also challenging. CHN have professed one Sister in 2017, the first in many years, and they now offer women the experience of being an 'Alongsider', living and working in the Community for a set period of time, learning about the Religious Life and taking these core values back out "into the world". Will the Religious Life disappear or will it be transformed? Its future is in the hands of God.



Guest Wing



CHN Library, with Mother Esther Foundress Window