

# Man of peace fought for human rights

PRESS: 29 APRIL 2017

The Very Reverend John Murray, minister, activist: b November 5, 1929, Dunedin; m Shirley Cockroft, 3s; d February 17, 2017, Kapiti, aged 87.

He was an activist, a leader of the Presbyterian Church whose thinking was decades ahead of his time, fighting for the right of same-sex couples to marry, against All Black tours to a South Africa divided by apartheid, campaigning for peace, and, in later years, for the right for people suffering a terminal illness to die with dignity.

The Very Reverend John Murray was also a gentle man, Amnesty International's Margaret Taylor said, and all he did came from a place of love. "He had a big heart, and big energy, and he put that into the protection and promotion of peace, and human rights."

Murray campaigned tirelessly for the many causes he believed in, and was unafraid of stirring controversy. As a minister, he was responsible for rejuvenating St Andrew's on The Terrace, opening the church, literally and figuratively, with lunchtime concerts, and lectures for people of any belief.

He was determined to move the church forward, said Hugh Templeton, his close friend for more than 70 years. "He was very brave, and highly intelligent," the former diplomat and politician says.

Another close friend, Sir Lloyd Geering, said in the eulogy that Murray was one of the most "socially conscious ministers of our day".

"Man of peace though John was, he refused to compromise with those who chose to confront him as his enemies."

Murray was born in 1929 to a pioneer Scottish settler family living in Dunedin. His father, Dr Stewart Murray, was a GP, and his mother, Muriel, a nurse. He was the youngest of four children, and the only brother to sisters Rae, Noreen, and Marjorie.

Surrounded by doctors, nurses, and sisters who became teachers, it was only natural he too would go into a life of service, his wife,



Shirley Murray, said.

King's High School was where John Murray met Templeton; the pair were part of a trio that the school's masters called the three musketeers, Templeton said.

His leadership qualities and creative way of bringing people together were clear even as a teenager, with a young Murray organising an end-of-year concert at the school where boys "took the mickey" out of the masters.

From Otago University Murray gained an MA in Latin, with first class honours, then headed to England, to Westminster Theological College, and King's College at Cambridge to study theology. That was followed by time in Geneva, Switzerland, where he gained a diploma of Ecumenical Studies at the Bossey Ecumenical Institute, part of the World Council of Churches.

Here his world was "burst open", his wife said, as he met and made friends with people from all over the world, in particular South Africa, learning of the pain apartheid was causing that country.

He married Shirley in 1954, and the couple had three sons, David, Alastair, and Rob.

When the couple returned to New Zealand in 1956, he became an ordained minister at St David's, a Presbyterian church in Taihape. From there he moved to Wellington, where he was the first ecumenical Chaplain at Victoria University.

While there he invited Lloyd Geering to deliver a sermon at the

university, with that sermon contributing to Geering's opponents starting to talk about heresy, which cumulated in Geering's famous heresy trial at the end of 1967.

Between 1967 and 1975 he served as the minister at Knox College in Christchurch before returning to Wellington, where he would take up the mantle of minister at St Andrew's on The Terrace.

During those years and over the following decades the causes the Rev Murray championed were many.

He supported homosexual law reform, racial equality, and for voluntary euthanasia to be legal. He also worked to change what he considered archaic abortion laws – he was part of the "Repeal" campaign against the Contraception, Sterilisation and Abortion Act – protested against the Vietnam War, and spoke out against the use of nuclear weapons.

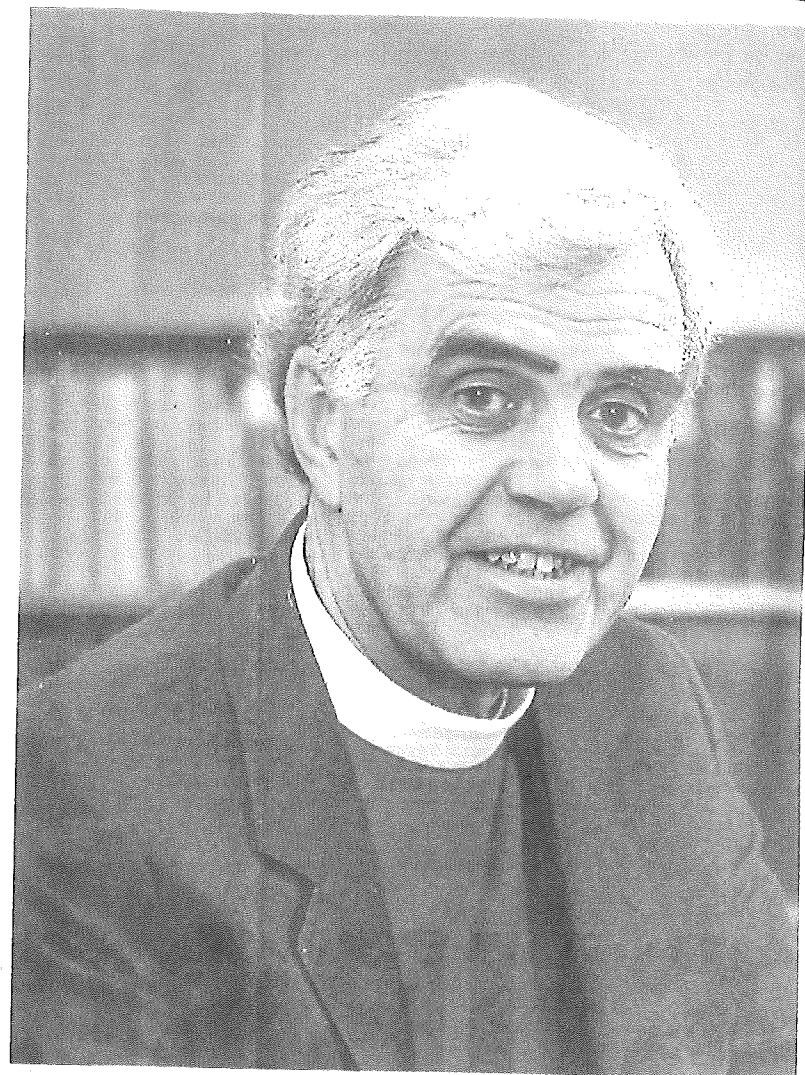
Shirley Murray said her husband's grandfather had been a pacifist in World War I, and Murray had a strong line on his paternal side of what might be called "that Scottish doggedness".

"He had almost a propensity to stir. He believed he could be a change agent, and make other people change agents ... he made sparks fly."

In the *Evening Post* in 1986 Murray said: "My activism would have died without such a spiritual base. It's an expression of my

Murray was director of the "Repeal" campaign, which gathered more than 300,000 signatures for a petition against the 1977 Contraception, Sterilisation and Abortion Act. He is pictured with Brenda Cutress and national co-ordinator Winifred Everitt.

PHOTO: NATIONAL PUBLIC LIBRARY REF: EP/1978/1855/8-F



John Murray's leadership qualities and creative way of bringing people together were clear even as a teenager.

spirituality."

He spoke of a deep spiritual life he had fostered since his days as a university student.

In the same article he revealed how he turned St Andrew's on The Terrace around, by making it a place for city workers to meet during the week, and hosting concerts and lectures open to those of any faith.

He loved music, and while his wife wrote new hymns for the church, he created an atmosphere where people would be willing to learn them. "He worked very hard to get people to sing New Zealand hymns ... as he said, every revolution or evolution has its marching songs," she says.

He believed hymns were the marching song of the church, and if the congregation was still singing "the old stuff", it was not marching with the present.

After he retired as a minister and moved to the Kapiti Coast with his wife, Murray continued to champion many causes, but euthanasia became the one on which he most concentrated.

In 2011 he said the present law was unjust, and it was a person's

right to be able to die, without suffering.

Murray was a presence in former Labour MP Maryan Street's life right from when she was a young person growing up in the Presbyterian Church.

"He seemed to me the very epitome of a modern, thinking Christian," she says. The two ended up working together on what would become her End of Life bill.

"He was endlessly patient, consultative, intelligent, farsighted and kind."

Amnesty's Margaret Taylor saw Murray as recently as December, when the two set to "plotting and planning" to ensure the Government would do more to support refugees.

"He would have gone to the grave campaigning, and there would have always been love in his heart. He always encouraged people to step up and be a bit better," she says. "A great kauri has fallen for New Zealand."

By Laura Dooney  
Sources: Murray family, Hugh Templeton, Lloyd Geering, Margaret Taylor, Maryan Street.