

Mary Baker has been a prominent figure in peace and justice activities for many years in Christchurch. Often the rallying voice behind the megaphone at marches, she has worked tirelessly for a number of organizations: CORSO, Catholic Commission for Justice and Development, Coalition against the Tour (Christchurch chairperson), HART and Ploughshares. Mary is now enjoying a retirement that includes beach and hill walks and dancing, punctuated by refreshing outings demonstrating for peace.

When did you become aware of being a peace person?

When I started working with CORSO back in the seventies and that was followed by working for Catholic Commission for Justice and Development with John Curnow.

John Curnow had this badge that said *There'll be no peace without justice*. For me peace means working for justice and the final outcome if justice is ever attained is peace. The thing that hurts me the most is racism and initially I became involved with peace through the Nuclear Movement in the 1970s. We went around parishes to make them nuclear free. I think the first big joy was having the Catholic Cathedral made a Nuclear Free building. Marie Venning was very responsible for getting the Catholic Peace movement together. We had marches and big colourful banners. Then there's also the part of peace which involves war and peace. My first involvement there was in '91 in trying to stop the war with Iraq and also this last war with Iraq. And of course with nuclear ships. I remember one fine day going out on a yacht and trying to stop this big American ship coming in.

That was in the seventies. Apartheid in South Africa was a huge issue, hunger, deprivation, the struggle for equality. As the seventies went by and the tour of eighty-one loomed I became involved with other groups as well.

So the first group you worked with was CORSO and then HART?

Yes, and then in Christchurch we had Coalition against the Tour of which I was chairperson. But that was not set up until probably 1980. I was involved with it when Trevor Richards was the national co-ordinator of HART in the 70s that's when I first became involved and that was through CORSO.

I started working for CORSO in 1973 and then my mother became ill and I stayed home to look after her and when I went back after that I worked for John Curnow. He had a huge impact on many people's lives. I learnt a huge amount from him. He was such a clever person with an absolutely brilliant mind and brilliant memory.

That was at the Catholic Commission for Justice and Development?

It changed its name slightly over the time. At first it was the Catholic Commission for Justice and Development, and then it became the Catholic Commission For Justice Peace and Development, and then later Evangelisation – that's the big word that was the in National Commission's title. I was mainly in the Christchurch Office. John Curnow was upstairs and kept an eye on what I was doing

The Commission had a project committee. The National Commission did the big funding but we had small funding. It mainly went to Christchurch groups but we supported the local Philippines Support Group, Women's Housing and many different groups around the city just with two or three hundred dollars at a time

What has motivated you in your work?

My father, Alfred Gason, brought us up to be very aware of injustice. I remember very well the time that in 1951 Waterfront Strike and him standing up in front of the RSA and saying that you're locking out these guys who have only a few years ago returned from fighting overseas and what was the justice of that. He was a great Labour Party person; one of my treasures is a personal note from Norman Kirk when he died.

My father had his eighteenth birthday on Gallipoli. He went to war at seventeen as they did those days and lied about his age. He was wounded in the leg which made him limp for the rest of his life.

During the Springbok tour I remember you leading marches with a megaphone and leading huge meetings. You stood out very strongly during the whole of the tour probably with Annie Bowden. What are some of the highlights that you remember from the tour?

The first highlight was when I went away from NZ for ten days to meet family in America and I left here thinking, no, I don't think it will happen because the majority of the population had voted against the tour. I had this ten days in USA and then got on the plane in Los Angeles and my daughter says to me 'That looks like the Springboks on the plane.' So I jumped on the plane and went straight up and told them that they weren't wanted and started quoting a few slogans around at the time and then one of the plane staff came up to me and told me I'd be offloaded if I didn't sit down and behave. So I waited till we got to Hawaii and then attacked the only black person in the team. I think his name was Chester Williams, I asked him why he was selling out and once again got warned I'd be left in Hawaii. We then got on the plane and I thought I needed to do something a bit more strategic so I waited until everyone was having breakfast not far out of NZ. I made myself, on the strawberry so called packet, a little banner with 'SHAME' on it and went over and over it with a red biro. I held it up and marched up and down the plane when everyone was at breakfast and the trays were down and they couldn't get up. The Springboks were absolutely startled. The abuse came from the other New Zealanders on the plane. The Springboks were just stunned, they didn't say a word.

So you were the very first demonstration?

It was the first demonstration but then when I got back they were having a day of shame. I got quite horrified because Annie Bowden was leading that one and they were trying to knock down the Lancaster Park fence. I remember at that stage I hadn't been involved in anything like that and I was quite shocked about it, about where it could go. Just the knocking down of property was entirely new for me. Then later on it seemed not so bad, just knocking down a fence, but I remember that first day shock, horror.

Well I think we marched every Wednesday and Saturday every time there was a game Then a Catholic Group including Jim Consedine took over the rugby rooms and that was an entirely different and very peaceful kind of action. It was



good to know there were other groups out there besides the official groups working. From then on there was just one action after another. We took over National Party Headquarters at one stage. Then the first big mass arrest in Hereford Street happened quite by accident. we were winding through that area of Hereford and Cashel St and suddenly saw ourselves right across that whole street and thought it would be a great place to sit down and so that was that the first mass arrest, I think there were about 179 arrested. I remember this young policeman arresting me. He was shaking like a leaf, but he put his thumbs behind my ears and it sort of immobilizes you but certainly all the police weren't like that.

I was in the cells that time for just a few hours. I was arrested about eight times in all and during that time I learned a lot about the women's movement.

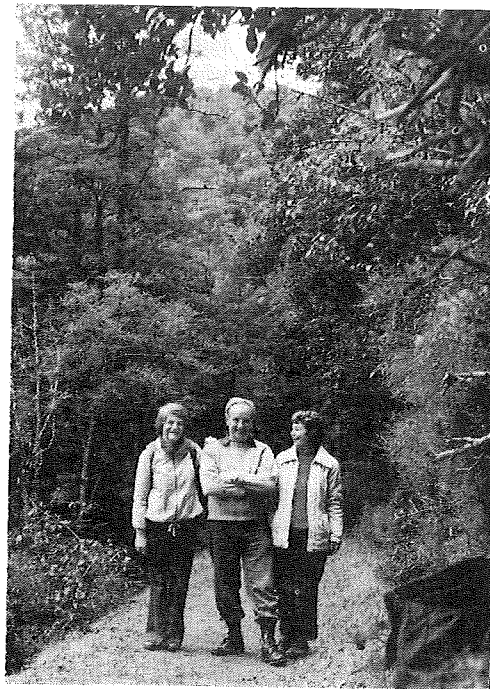
What are some other examples of successful campaigns you have been involved in?

I suppose the most obviously successful were the HART and anti apartheid campaign and the Coalition set-up which did have an effect. The whole rugby thing being so huge as it was in NZ and in South Africa. I think it happened in a reasonably significant way to bring so-called democracy to South Africa. Also the Peace Movement – banning nuclear ships from NZ was highly successful and is still operating today. And there has never been any attempt to try and build a nuclear power station because of the whole feeling in the country and I don't think that's changed significantly.

There are others most obviously successful in a small way, such as Women's Housing. They set up a Housing Trust for women. Also the Philippines support group. There were several other groups like that which we helped locally. It might be just a little project but it might benefit a lot of people over a long period of time.

At a very grassroots level what work did you do in the area of peace?

It started when we shifted from Gloucester St right in the city to Shirley. I had by then given up any paid work. A lot of my work with the Catholic Commission had been on a volunteer basis. I was living in the edge of one of the poorest areas of Christchurch, Emmet St in Shirley. Through that I became aware of the lives of many of the young women around, They were solo mothers, single mothers with families and it was really really hard. So with Mary Reilly at that time we started visiting these people and the names kept coming from St Vincent De Paul and friends who would put us on to them. I became really aware of the lives of those people and how hard they were and how they were struggling with children and with finance. We started taking them all sorts of things, food parcels and getting shoes for their children, providing some support and friendship. I remember once in a particularly deprived household a young woman was to have her sixteenth birthday and this place was really really dirty with dogs living inside, and a group of us went and got the house ready for this sixteenth birthday party It was a pretty big task and we were confronted with some very sad situations at times. For



Mary Baker, John Curnow, and Marie Venning.

three or four years we built up between us a group of over thirty women who we visited on a regular basis and just tried to do what we could for

And this was yourself and Mary Reilly?

And later Colleen Costello joined us too and Colleen also became very involved in the Drapes For Houses Trust which was started by Del Small to supply good drapes to save on electricity costs. They worked in with South Power, and Colleen did that for a long time.

I worked for CCJD from probably 1974 until the end of '81, and from 1988 until 1991. Bishop Meeking closed us down but we all were looking still for things to do.

The Ploughshares Group was started after the '81 Tour . Our big thing was to go out every Friday to the airport to protest against the American involvement at Harwood and Deepfreeze and that went on for a number of years.

Jim Consedine started it up and a group from the Catholic Justice Movement. Marie Venning, Eileen Shewan, Pat Smaile, Ray Scott and others were involved in that. It was really only a small group of us that used to go out on a Friday.

You mentioned the Consedines, Bob and Jim?

Bob taught me a lot in CORSO and I was a friend of Jimmy's for years – he was always very supportive of any movement for justice. One of the things from Jim, which in later times has been quite helpful to me, was the Funeral Choice. Because of that I was able to do the whole of my husband's funeral just with family. We didn't make the coffin, but we did the whole service.

What has sustained you through the years?

My involvement with the Catholic Church, however, in later times I became very disillusioned with the Catholic Church so I subsequently left the Church about eight years ago. I'm really sustained by my beliefs, my spirituality, and through friends' support.

When you've been really involved in issues you don't just turn off, even though I decided a while ago that I had done my activist work as a whole. I'm very strong about what I believe in and I still try to learn as much as I can through articles documentaries, National Radio – and organisations like CAFCA never put me wrong.

And in a world where money is such a huge thing now. Not just to have possessions, but give your kids good education and give them everything. I am sustained by the knowledge that the whole awareness about peace and justice will help me through life An absolutely critical part of living.

Is there any other thing that you'd like to say to young peace people nowadays?

Don't be disheartened. Every action does bear fruit somewhere and it's still important to work for peace through justice and justice through peace and it will be a sad day when there aren't any young people out there. I was heartened last year going to the marches against the Iraq War to see so many young people and being very ably lead by young people, very articulate young people getting up there in front and that's very heartening for the older ones.