

2026

A project to prepare women as theological educators in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands

Jenny O'Brien

Urgent Appeal - Pastoral Liturgy needs help

Follow this and additional works at: <https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/pastoral-liturgy>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), and the [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

O'Brien, Jenny. "A project to prepare women as theological educators in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands." *Pastoral Liturgy* 56, no. 3 (2026): 11-14. <https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/pastoral-liturgy/vol56/iss3/4>

This Article is brought to you by ResearchOnline@ND. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pastoral Liturgy by an authorized administrator of ResearchOnline@ND. For more information, please contact researchonline@nd.edu.au.





A project to prepare women as theological educators in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands

By Jenny O'Brien

When the Sisters of Mercy first answered the call to work in Papua New Guinea in 1956, they found themselves working alongside religious men from the congregation of the Divine Word Missionaries. In her marvellous recounting of the story of the Sisters of Mercy in Papua New Guinea, Sr Teresa Flaherty notes that the two congregations became, in many ways, 'companions in mission as Mercy foundations and communities spread in dioceses under the Church jurisdiction of Divine Word Missionary bishops'¹. This strong relationship has continued and in the past decade, the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea (IMSAPNG) have worked with the Divine Word University (established in Madang in 1996) to provide ongoing spiritual and theological formation to religious sisters of different congregations at diploma and advanced diploma level. To this end well-qualified female lecturers in the fields of systematic and moral theology, scripture, liturgy and sacraments, ecclesiology, missiology, sociology and Catholic social teaching, communications, culture and church history have provided intensive courses of study at a number of sites spread throughout PNG – and more recently also in the Solomon Islands' capital of Honiara. Currently all the lecturers are drawn from Australia, but the end goal of the project is to have a cohort of indigenous sisters themselves as lecturers.

Since the first course offered by the scripture scholar, Sr Elizabeth Dowling rsm, more than 150 sisters from 23 religious congregations have undertaken at least one unit of study. Indeed, more than 40 have graduated at the diploma level and 13 at the advanced diploma level.

Sr Ilsa Neicinieks rsm and I were privileged to join as a lecturers in Liturgy in 2017, when we travelled to Mt Hagen, capital of the Western Highlands Province to present the course entitled 'Liturgy: Celebrating our Faith in Papua New Guinea'. We worked with 32 sisters from several different congregations whose ministries included education, health, administration, formation and pastoral care of families and young people. The sisters ranged in age from mid-twenties to early seventies with educational levels ranging from Year 9 to post-secondary.

Ilsa and I arrived a couple of days before classes were due to commence so that we could experience the local Sunday Eucharist. This was an exceedingly joyful occasion, with wonderful singing and full participation of the people. We were a little disappointed that the new cathedral had not yet been completed (as things turned out it would not be consecrated for another six years), but we were able to see it

¹ Teresa A. Flaherty, *Crossings in Mercy: The Story of the Sisters of Mercy, Papua New Guinea 1956-2006*, Openbook Howden Print and Design, St Mary's, South Australia, 2008, 14.

under construction and marvel at the thought that this huge building would be filled several times each weekend with Catholic faithful.

One of the great advantages of this diploma program is that the sisters come together for around ten days, sharing living quarters, meals and recreation as well as the times of study and prayer. Perhaps for the first time, the different congregations were working together and building bonds of friendship that had not been so actively fostered before. Moreover, the older Sisters took it upon themselves to ensure that the younger ones were fully involved in group discussions and contributed to the sharing that was part of the course. The natural reserve and sense of social hierarchy is one of the factors that presented a challenge; building confidence in expressing their *own* opinion (and not just what they thought would be the 'right' answer) took time. It has been one of the joys of our work in PNG and the Solomons to see the sisters grow in self-confidence and willingness to share opinions that may be greeted with quite robust conversation.

The course was structured so that there would be plenty of opportunity for discussion and reflection, and assessment tasks included not only writing assignments but also dramatic presentations and group-work. The areas covered included consideration of the term 'liturgy', extensive exploration of the Eucharist, the Liturgical Year – beginning with the Easter Triduum and then the other liturgical seasons and Ordinary Time – the liturgical ministries and liturgical document. In more recent times we have had to revise this curriculum to include Liturgy of the Word with Holy Communion as many of the sisters work in quite remote areas where no priest is available and they are called on to lead the faithful in worship.

A particular challenge when teaching in PNG is that while all formal education takes place in English, this is not the first language of any of the sisters. PNG is an extremely diverse country, with over 22 distinct cultures and 800 discrete languages. For most Papua New Guineans their first language is that of their local tribe or community. The 'lingua franca' is *Tok Pisin* – the simplified form of English developed over the decades of the twentieth century by Melanesians from Vanuatu, Samoa, Solomon Islands and New Guinea. When PNG became independent in 1975 Tok Pisin was recognised in the Constitution as one of the national languages and since then it has become an important language of Papua New Guinean identity. English becomes the third (or even fourth) language of most of the sisters with whom we are working. Once the units began to be offered in the Solomon Islands we encountered *Pijin*, a form of the Melanesian Pidgin languages closely related to Tok Pisin but nevertheless distinct from it.

This language challenge has to be taken into consideration when setting and marking assessment tasks. However, because the sisters are undertaking study at the diploma level, a certain level of competence has to be achieved by all of them, regardless of their language proficiency or their previous level of education. We have noticed over the ten years that the program has been running a significant advancement in ability to write in clear English. Techniques such as footnoting and correct referencing are still a work in progress.

A challenge that faces those who teach these units is the need to understand that the Christianity of Papua New Guinea (and in particular its expression in the Catholic tradition) is strongly influenced by the traditions of the peoples that were established long before any Christian missionaries arrived. PNG and the Solomon Islands are, in sociological terms, only recent converts to Christianity, with the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart arriving from France only 150 years ago. It is quite extraordinary to think that in that short time the countries have reached the point where more than one in four Papua New Guineans and one in five Solomon Islanders are Catholic.

Traditions that are deep-rooted in a nation will continue to flourish in one form or another despite any efforts by missionaries to repress them. An interesting paper by Dusan Lužný and Martin Soukup² deals with this very question. Among the most widespread traditions they name ancestor worship, recognition of an invisible non-empirical world alongside a visible empirical world, and development of a variety of 'male' cults. The overriding importance of family and kinship dictated ways that families lived together and their attitudes towards biological reproduction. In many regions the male-only houses represented the religious and social centre of the community, since it was in them that important rituals took place, sacred objects were kept and important community decisions were made.

It is easy to see how the patriarchal systems of Christian traditions could be easily assumed into the local male world view described by Lužný and Soukup. However, it must be noted that not all of Papua New Guinea has a tradition of male leadership. There are also matrilineal societies in which women are regarded as custodians of the land, are influential leaders and very much involved in the making of key community decisions. Such communities exist in Bougainville, East and West New Britain and New Ireland.

The Melanesian awareness of a spirit world, in which the spirits of those who have died, the spirits of animals, forests, plants etc co-exist with the spirits of living humans, reveals the recognition of a fundamental 'life power' that pervades the entire universe and calls for the maintenance of 'right relationships' between all elements of creation. Lužný and Soukup note that the native converts who assisted the Western missionaries and often worked in the more remote regions of PNG 'creatively reinterpreted Christian ideas and concepts so that they could be introduced to the people in the context of local cultures.' In this way Christian ideas were often adjusted to local conditions.

It was very interesting, then, when in 2025 the question of Christian marriage came up in the course of our discussions on how the sacraments were celebrated in PNG and the Solomon Islands. One of the younger Sisters, from a very small island in the south of PNG, spoke with great feeling about the way the traditional practice of entire families offering care and hospitality to each other following the marriage of a young man and a young woman from their midst had been eroded with the introduction of Christian marriage which, in their eyes, focused more on the couple than on the families. It seems to me that every effort needs to be made not to suppress what are

² Dusan Lužný and Martin Soukup, 'Encounter of Religions in Papua New Guinea – Towards a Relationship between Christianity and Original Traditions', *Horizons* vol.50 (2), 2023, 1-22.

obviously *good* features of traditional customs which can actually enhance what the Church teaches.

Another of the fundamental values of Melanesian peoples is closely linked to this. All people belong to tribes and clan identity and history are extremely important. The local community is the place where such identity is recognised and fostered. Thus, the concept of small Christian communities makes sense to the Melanesian mind and aligns with their cultural background. Moreover, the sense of 'home country/region' is very strong among Melanesian peoples and presents a challenge to the sisters themselves who, on joining a religious congregation, can be sent to work in a part of the country which is entirely 'foreign' to them – both linguistically and culturally. They too have to make adjustments to their presuppositions and world views so as to be able to minister to those in their care and this often calls for serious conversation and significant effort on their part.

The great cultural and linguistic variety that comprises the Melanesian countries – specifically PNG and the Solomon Islands in the case of this paper – is one of the reasons that the Liturgy Unit which we teach is entitled 'Liturgy: Celebrating our Faith in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.' It is not just a matter of transplanting 'western' practices to PNG and the Solomons, but a matter of looking at what the Church teaches, exploring the underlying theologies and scriptural foundations, listening to the present experience of the Church in each particular location and then seeing how all of this can best be fostered in any particular location. A great help in all of this are the documents from the Second Vatican Council. The reforms and insights of the Council provide a wonderful platform on which to base liturgical teaching. Naturally, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy has to be carefully unpacked, but it contains the seeds for very fruitful growth and provides a lens through which to interpret later documents coming from the Vatican. While many of the sisters find reading such documents quite challenging it is essential that they are familiar with them so that they can understand well why the Church teaches and why the liturgy is the way it is.

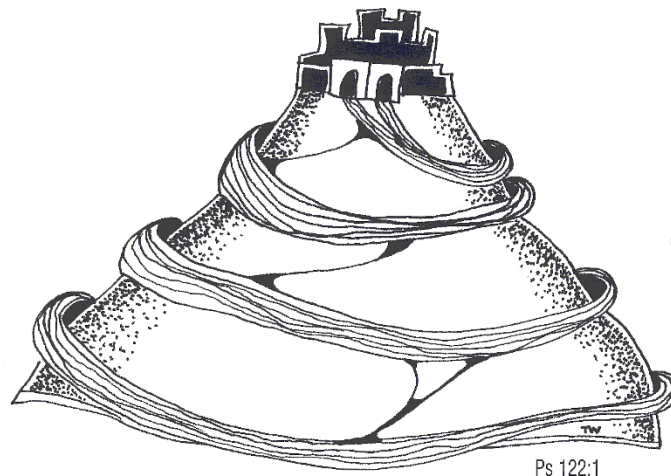
The commitment of the sisters to their communities and ministries is an inspiration to those of us privileged to work with them. In many (if not most) situations they operate in quite spartan conditions and yet they do so with joy and enthusiasm. The people are prepared to travel long distances, on foot or by boat, to participate in Sunday Eucharist, and their liturgical celebrations are filled with songs, dances, processions and local colour. Traditional clothing – especially feathers and grass skirts – movement and flowers are incorporated into the liturgy as appropriate. The guitar seems to have become the main instrument of accompaniment but the traditional drums are also very evident.

Both Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands are very young countries. It was in 1975 and 1978 respectively that they assumed independence, but both still rely on foreign aid in order to survive and thrive. They experience a number of threats related to climate change, especially in the low-lying islands, and building infrastructure in highly forested and mountainous areas is time-consuming and expensive. There is a high degree of unemployment among young people in both

these countries. In the case of PNG in particular this has led to the growth of gangs who exhibit violence and other anti-social behaviours and militate against a calm and peaceful environment.

Despite these challenges, the sisters who participate in the program of spiritual and theological formation face life with optimism and are extremely grateful to have the opportunity to study in this way. As of this year, those who have completed the advanced diploma have the possibility of undertaking study at the bachelor's level and it is from this group that we hope that the future lecturers in this course will emerge. Much has been spoken in recent years about the 'liturgical colonisation' that continues in too many regions of the world. Perhaps this project can be regarded as one step in overcoming this and truly taking on board paragraphs 37-40 of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy which refer to fostering the 'qualities and talents of the various races and nations' and even a 'radical adaptation of the liturgy'.

The sisters whom I have encountered on my five visits to PNG and the Solomon Islands fill me with confidence that they have all the qualities and skills needed to become excellent teachers and carry forward the program that enables rigorous study in all the theological disciplines. I look forward to that time with joyful anticipation.



Ps 122:1

**Let us go rejoicing
to God's house.**