



BOOK REVIEW

TED ROGERS: A MEMOIR ‘JESUIT, SOCIAL PIONEER AND AIDS ACTIVIST IN ZIMBABWE’

Reviewed by Nigel Hall

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Father Ted Rogers has put together a remarkable memoir of his life in the first volume of a series of books on *Christian Lives in Africa*, published by Cluster Publications in 2012. Ted notes in his Introduction that his main motivation for writing these memoirs was to recognise those who worked with and helped him, most on a voluntary basis.

The book contains a wealth of information on Ted’s life and his experiences around the world, including photographs and index. I knew Ted for many years when I was teaching at the School of Social Work in Zimbabwe and know how much his contribution in founding that School was appreciated and valued. As Professor Chavunduka, former Vice Chancellor of the University of Zimbabwe notes in his Foreword, his greatest contribution – and this is among many – was in the field of social work in Zimbabwe.

From Liverpool to Freetown

Ted Rogers has led a colourful and active life and the memoir traces much of this. He starts from Liverpool where he was born in 1924 into a large family of nine siblings on a council estate – his father had been wounded in the Great War and his mother was a tailoress. It was a tough time but the family seems to have been very close. Living near the sea Ted joined the merchant navy as a midshipman in 1941 and as this was during the Second World War he soon found himself in a convoy transporting cargo to West Africa. On his first voyage his ship was torpedoed and together with survivors made their way in a lifeboat to Freetown. Following this dramatic exploit which he typically underplays, Ted recounts other experiences on these convoys and in the Navy which took him to Ceylon and India.

Ted had decided to go into the priesthood and following his demobilisation from the Merchant Navy trained as a Jesuit priest in some of their stately homes in the UK and in 1961 the decision was made – without consultation – for him to be posted to Rhodesia. Ted was then sent to St Paul’s Mission, Musami, where he became the headmaster of the Secondary School there, later moving to St Peter’s, the first Catholic Church in Harare, the township now known as Mbare in the capital Salisbury.

St Peter’s Kubatana

Ted started up a desperately needed secondary school in the Highfields township – St. Peter’s Kubatana (which now has about 1000 in the school and a technical college) – followed by a practical one-year Certificate course at the School of Social Service which he founded in February 1964 initially with 18 students, with Ted having to fund-raise both locally and internationally. This was his major achievement as the renamed School of Social Work – which became the first Associate College of the University of Rhodesia in 1969 – went on to train hundreds of social workers, with around 300, due to political and economic instability, now practising in the UK.

During the period of the Smith Regime the Rhodesian Catholic Bishops Conference exposed some of the racial inequities in the country, and this led up to the formation of the Justice and Peace Commission, which Ted had a major part in organising. Ted also became involved with the work of various charitable organisations, Catholic Women’s Clubs, was co-founder with Prof Lawrence Levy of SASCAM (for mentally handicapped children), Chairperson of the Council of Social Services (later known as VOICE and NANGO) and Christian Care for a time. Ted was also Chairperson of the Commission on Social Service and Development (CSSD) for the Archdiocese of Salisbury and became involved in practical assistance to people in the protected villages, such as the provision of food and blankets. Catholic priests and nuns were targeted during the Zimbabwe liberation war and the book details some of some of the gruesome acts committed against them during this period.

Reconstruction and rehabilitation

Following the end of the war Ted contributed to the work of reconstruction and rehabilitation and the return of refugees to the country through various NGOs. Then after 21 years as the founder Principal of the School of Social Work Ted stepped down and left for a three-month tour of Brazil, part of a year's sabbatical at St Antony's College Oxford, where he studied the work of the Church with the poor and marginalised, later presented to the University at a seminar.

In the memoir Ted suggests lessons for Southern Africa, such as the value of "deep" participation in development by "Basic Christian Communities". Returning to Zimbabwe in 1986 Ted took up a post as secretary to the Archbishop of Harare and was tasked by the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference (ZCBC) to develop a programme on HIV/AIDS, later helping set up the AIDS Counselling Trust (ACT). Ted carried on his special interest in AIDS in his post (from 1988) as the Director of IMBISA – the Interregional Meeting of Bishops in Southern Africa – and visited and presented talks in various countries in the region.

'God in all things'

Ted relates how he has been profoundly influenced by the mystical ideas of the philosopher and Jesuit priest Teilhard de Chardin and the idea of 'finding God in all things' – i.e. secular work offered up as a service to God, which I'm sure Ted has personally manifested. In the 1990s Ted continued his work on HIV/AIDS after stepping down from IMBISA, particularly developing training sessions for youth on peer education based on social work principles, and developing Youth Against AIDS clubs in 40 schools in the country. He worked with Shelter Trust – an organisation headed by one of his former social work students that helps women who are at risk of abandoning their babies.

In 2011 following a serious illness Ted was re-assigned to Boscombe in Bournemouth, one of two Jesuit retirement homes in England, where he is today.

This book is to be recommended as a highly informative and detailed account of a very committed Jesuit over half a century in many various ways, but his outstanding contribution is in building the social work profession in Southern Africa.

If you wish to obtain Father Rogers' book you can do so from Redemptorist Publications at <http://rpbooks.co.uk>, price £15.

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