

# Dorothy McRae-McMahon

McRae-McMahon, Dorothy in: O'Donnell, Penny and Symons, Lynette Australians Against Racism - Testimonies from the Anti-Apartheid Movement in Australia Sydney, Pluto Press Australia, 1995, pp 84-87.

**The Reverend Dr Dorothy McRae-McMahon was ordained as a minister of the Uniting Church in Australia in 1982. From 1983 to 1993 she was the minister with the Pitt Street Uniting Church in Sydney. In February 1993 she became the director of the National Commission for Mission for the Uniting Church in Australia. In 1992 Dorothy was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Letters by Macquarie University in Sydney for her work with minority communities and her contribution to the spiritual life of the Australian community.**

**Dorothy believes in the power of ritual. For her, the ceremonial sharing of pain, anger and fear is a vital prelude to the affirmations of hope and unity that sustain people committed to the struggle for equity, justice and freedom. It's that sense of corporate hope that sustained Dorothy during the two years that she and her parish were harassed and vilified by an extremist right-wing group.**

In the autumn of 1986, six men marched into the Uniting Church in Pitt Street during my morning service. They marched in fast, carrying the Eureka flag. They came down the centre aisle, put a pamphlet on the lectern and handed out various leaflets before marching out again.

That was the beginning. From that day on National Action launched a sustained campaign of harassment against me because of my involvement in the anti-apartheid movement and other anti-racism activities. It went on for two years.

Initially, most of the harassment was aimed at

frightening me and trying to bring down my career. They sent out pamphlets not just to my parish hut around many of the parishes of the Uniting Church, claiming some pretty amazing things about my sex life. It would have been exciting indeed if I'd been doing the things they said I was doing! One particularly unpleasant pamphlet they put together was called 'Sodomy and Gonorrhoea in the Uniting Church'. It was a classic Nazi document, mainly homophobic and racist, and it was clearly an attempt to end my ministry.

The church authorities firmly supported me and there came a time when it would have been very difficult if they hadn't done so. The parishioners at the Pitt Street church were also supportive to a person. Members of National Action had clearly been going through the church's rubbish bins for some time and they'd got hold of discarded documents including part of our mailing list. They started phoning up some of our people and saying: 'We know where you live and we know the names of your children and if you don't leave the Pitt Street church we'll come and do something to your children'. We lost nobody. In fact we gained people in that period.

By 1986, the Uniting Church in Pitt Street had clearly identified itself with the anti-apartheid cause. Archbishop Desmond Tutu had spoken there on two momentous occasions. It's a church that seats 2000 people and we'd never seen it full like it was on both those days. It was a great thing for us to facilitate the gathering of so many anti-apartheid activists. We also had an anti-racist graffiti team which went around the city painting over slogans that said things like 'Kill an Asian a day'. I was the only church employee in the regular team that went out, the rest were all parishioners from the Pitt Street church. On one occasion we approached the railway authorities asking them to wipe out slogans in the Stanmore railway tunnel. Six

weeks went by without a response, so we went and did it ourselves. We got caught and were arrested for being on railway property.

My immediate church authorities were absolutely supportive of my anti-apartheid activities, even when I got arrested. Others were more ambivalent. The City of Sydney Ministers' Fellowship wrote me a letter saying that they hoped I was all right but wanted me to know that they didn't really approve of that sort of activity. They thought our acts of civil disobedience 'lowered the dignity of the cloth'.

I suspect the publicity we got after the graffiti incident was a triggering point for National Action's campaign. Apart from the pamphlets there was nuisance-type harassment. Week after week they poured sump oil and printing toner across the front steps of the church. We sometimes had to pay for it to be cleaned up because it would soak into the sandstone. Their campaign gradually escalated until it became quite frightening. I was living alone at the time and they'd phone me in the middle of the night and make death threats and say various other horrible things. Bags of faeces and vomit were thrown all over the front steps of my house and stuffed in the letter box or in the windows. One time they graffitied my front fence. If I left the phone off the hook or later when I got a silent number they would come around and knock on my door in the middle of the night

I was frightened during these incidents but I also felt supported by many people around me, not only in the church but outside as well I have to say my spirituality sustained me too. They never gained power over me, nor any of us in the parish. After they'd been around I could always ring up somebody from the parish. No matter what time of the night it was, even at three o'clock in the morning, somebody would always hop in their car and come around clean up the mess, sit down, have a cup of coffee and debrief me.

We eventually decided to go public about National Action's campaign. We'd been reluctant to do so because we didn't want to give them

any publicity. But then it went on and on and they'd been harassing the parish for some eight months, we thought: 'Well the Australian community has a right to know what's going on in its midst.' We were also getting very angry by then.

We took the initiative and wrote an open letter to the Sydney Morning Herald. The media took an immediate interest. We discovered lots of other people were being attacked by racist groups. Often they were individuals who had no support group or members of the Jewish community Or people who worked for the NSW Ethnic Affairs Commission, even some journalists. We then formed a loose-knit anti-racism coalition and started lobbying for government and police action.

We took a deputation to the NSW Police Minister. He was outrageous. He was absolutely outrageous. He told us that things like a few bricks through windows were par for the course in a diverse sort of community where people have different opinions. We cattle out of the meeting stunned by his attitude. We didn't know what to do next because we really needed his support. What was even more surprising was that his press secretary and advisers later put out a press release which said the Minister was really troubled by the racist attacks and they had to stop. That was very different from what he said to us. In the end the Sydney Morning Herald ran a column which gave our account of that meeting with him.

In all this, more and more anti-racism groups came together in support of each other. We had very moving experiences. One time people gathered on the front steps of the Pitt Street church with placards saying 'If the police won't defend this church - we will'. They were people who wouldn't normally come near a church.

Finally, National Action became over-confident. They got a life-size fibreglass effigy of a woman and put a tyre around its neck and lit it on my front doorstep. It was a mock necklacing. They took a photo of themselves doing it, clad in camouflage outfits and with masks over their

heads. Then they sent an open letter to the Sydney Morning Herald, with a copy of the photo, saying this would be the end of me if I continued taking the stand I was taking.

That was their downfall in the end. After two years of police investigations, they changed the officer-in-charge of the case and Neville Ireland was assigned to the job. He cleaned it up in two weeks using the photo. Apparently camouflage uniforms are like fingerprints so he identified the suspects, raided their houses and arrested 12 of them. They were all members of National Action. He also found 500 prohibited weapons in Wayne Smith's house. It turned out that Smith had been one of the key people involved in the harassment campaign, especially the pamphlets. He was murdered in the end by someone from National Action.

Those two years were very frightening but I have to say that deep down I maintained the absolute certainty that we would get through it. I believe both philosophically and religiously that life is of its essence corporate and that's what sustains me. If you try and tackle something alone you haven't got the resources to do it, nor should you expect to do it. I work with groups of people and we support each other. During that time I always carried a strong sense of inner power with me and, although it may sound mystical, when they used to come to my door in the middle of the night, I would always smell this sickly sweet odour. Quite apart from the faeces and vomit, there'd always be that same odour and when I reflected on it, I realised it was the smell of a dead body.

I sensed they were people of death. I knew I was a person of life. They were so consumed by hate that I could smell death around them. That affirmed in me the conviction that even if they killed me I was still a person of life. I knew I was engaged in struggling for something that was right, that connected me to all the powers of good and love in the universe. I call those powers God, others might call them the glorious things about human life or the connection to justice, truth and love. That may sound esoteric to some but it wasn't for me at the time.