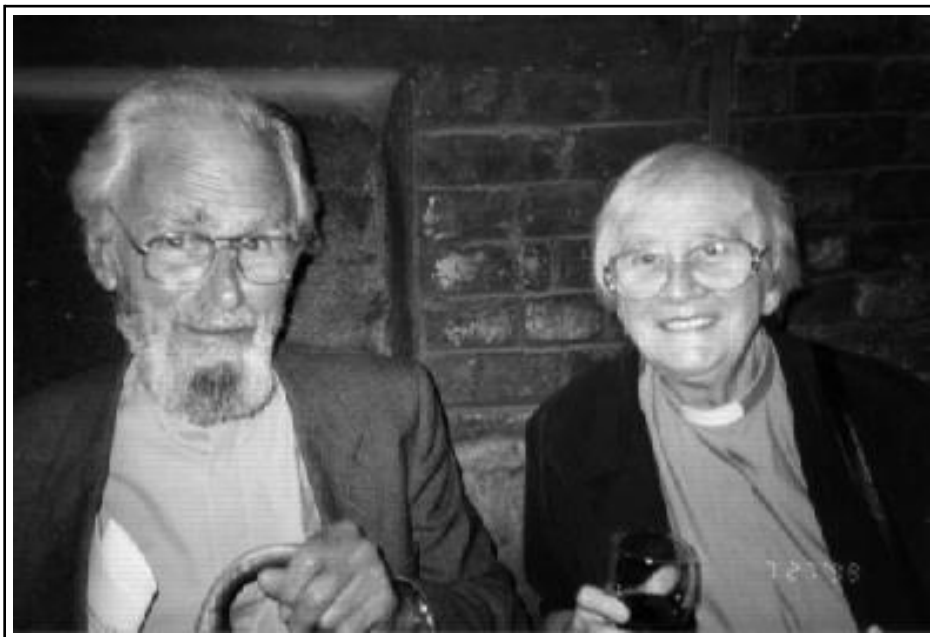


Joyce Bennett

This is a 'combined edition' of a two-part article about the life and work of Joyce Bennett, written by Andrew Paine and published in Parish magazine of St Francis of Assisi, Terriers, in September and October 2006.

On the 2nd of December 2006 the congregation of St Francis will be host to a number of foreign visitors who will be joining us as we celebrate the life and work of a most distinguished member of our congregation – Joyce Bennett. The occasion celebrates the fact that Joyce was ordained priest into the Church on 3rd December 1971, 35 years ago, in Hong Kong by Bishop Gilbert Baker. This was a most significant date in the history of the ordination of Women into the church. Prior to this there had been only one instance of a woman being ordained into the priesthood, Florence Li in 1944, also by the Bishop of Hong Kong under emergency circumstances brought about by the Japanese occupation during the second world war. However Joyce's ordination makes her the first of two women (along with Jane Hwang) to have been ordinarily ordained into the church, and thus the first of what is now a long established line of female priests.



Joyce with the Revd Austin Williams, Vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields in the early 1980s. He invited her to join his staff when she retired from Hong Kong.

This fact alone makes for a special day of celebration for those who supported the movement of ordination for women and who will recall the debates and issues of the day surrounding this event. When introducing Joyce to anyone it is inevitable that her place in history as the first non-emergency woman priest is the first thing that will be mentioned. It is, however, only one aspect of her life and work; as this article seeks to explain, there is an awful lot more to Joyce than meets the eye! Joyce's story is of a remarkable life defined by witness and service to others and above all by a response to our Lord Jesus and a life empowered by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In addition to being a priest Joyce was a missionary in Hong Kong for 34 years; the principal of a Chinese Girls School for 15 years; a member of Hong Kong's legislative council, and on 'retirement' to England was a counsellor and priest for the Chinese community in London at St. Martin-in-the-Fields. Along the way she has managed to become fluent in Cantonese (a language so complex I managed to learn about ten words in 15 years) and has been recognised for her service to the Chinese community with various awards, including being awarded the OBE in 1978. I think in all honesty that if any one of us had had success in any one of the fields of priesthood, missionary, educator, or even legislator that Joyce has achieved we should be forgiven for having felt we had achieved something – Joyce has succeeded in all these fields.

Born in London on 22nd April 1923, she attended Burlington School where she became head of school before going on to gain a degree in History at Westfield College, University of London in 1944. Due to the wartime evacuation measures both Burlington School and Westfield College were evacuated to Oxford and so from the 6th form onwards Joyce was immersed in the rich cultural, scholastic and inspirational Christian influences that the city could offer. Her original intention was to teach but during this period Joyce experienced an increasing calling towards missionary work. Following two years teaching Joyce commenced training with the CMS and in February 1949 she arrived in Hong Kong to commence what was eventually to become 34 years of outstanding Christian witness and service to that community.

Her missionary work was founded primarily on education, a subject for which she has retained an undying passion. She first taught at St

Stephen's Girls' College from 1949 to 1960 before moving to Chung Chi College (later to become part of the Chinese University) for two years from 1961 to 1963. Joyce was ordained Deacon by Bishop Hall in 1962 and from 1963 to 1968 also served as Chaplain to the Bishop Hall Jubilee School.

Hong Kong in the years after the Second World War faced considerable social pressures particularly for the poor Chinese working class. There was mass overcrowding as numbers in the colony swelled with families fleeing the communist revolution across the border in mainland China. Most working class lived in overcrowded slum conditions and faced unemployment, with insufficient schools and clinics; social services as we recognise them were non-existent.



Joyce with Professor Ma, who was her student in the 1950s at St Stephen's Girls College. The picture behind is a carpet depicting St Catharine's School and was a retirement gift from her staff.

In these stressful times the prospects for working class Chinese children was poor. It was against this background that Joyce undertook the establishment and running of St Catharine's School for Girls in Kwun

Tong, a working class area where she remained as principal for 15 years until her retirement in 1983. The establishment of this school and the hope, joy and opportunity it has given to hundreds of poor children is itself a tremendous tribute to Joyce and her response to God's calling to service. The accounts of former pupils reveals how much concern, love and devotion Joyce spent on her students and reveals a record of tireless devotion to the poor and deprived of Hong Kong. But Joyce had further ways to serve our Lord. At the same time as undertaking this work Joyce was progressing towards eventual ordination in the Church, being ordained Deacon in Hong Kong by Bishop Hall in 1962.

Joyce was finally ordained priest, along with Jane Hwang, on 3rd December 1971 in Hong Kong by Bishop Gilbert Baker. Space does not permit a full account of the events surrounding this historic event. Most of us will recall the debate on the question of the ordination of women at the time. It was an intense debate with much feeling expressed on both sides. When I first interviewed Joyce I wondered whether I was about to meet some radical advocate of the feminist movement – a sort of cross between Joan of Arc and Germaine Greer! However, I, like all of us who know her, was so impressed with her quiet graceful manner as she explained the need for tolerance and patience in dealing with opposition and allowing time for the Holy Spirit to work on the hearts of men (and women!).

Joyce's work in Hong Kong continued until 1983. During that time, in addition to her work at St. Catharine's, she preached (in Cantonese) at St. Thomas' Church. She also became more widely recognised for her work and in 1975 was appointed to the advisory committee to the Independent Committee Against Corruption (ICAC), a body established to combat the then wide-spread practice of corruption throughout Hong Kong. The successful work of the ICAC has contributed significantly to making Hong Kong the Financial and Economic centre of the Far East that it is today.

In 1976 she was appointed by Governor MacLehose to the Legislative Council (effectively the non-elected Parliament of Hong Kong) where she spoke forcefully for the rights of the poor and underprivileged and fought for improvements in so many areas. These included funding and provision for secondary education, facilities for the handicapped, the deaf, those requiring special needs, medical facilities and hospitals, for

improvements in the police force and anti-corruption measures, and improvements in the treatment of junior offenders. For this and her work at St. Catharine's Joyce was awarded the OBE in 1978.

On 'retirement' to England Joyce continued in her commitment to the Chinese with her work for the large Chinese community associated with St. Martin-in-the-Fields. The church had seen a growing Chinese community formed from migrant workers and students studying in London. Many of this community were isolated and far from friends and many had poor English. In addition to conducting services Joyce assisted police to interpret for Cantonese speakers and assisted in translation. For many isolated Chinese in a foreign land Joyce became a true friend in need.

This is the very briefest account of Joyce's many accomplishments; truly in such a short space there is insufficient room to pay full tribute. However, simply listing her achievements only goes so far in describing her – rather like trying to describe your favourite meal simply by listing the ingredients. To fully appreciate all that Joyce represents you simply have to talk to her. Joyce is one of those people in whom you immediately recognise the presence of the Holy Spirit at work. In her book "This God Business" Joyce herself talks with fondness of her Grandfather, describing him as being one of 'a number of vibrant models who also knew that their lives were involved in God's business'. As we go through life occasionally we all come across that 'special' person who for us becomes a 'vibrant model', Joyce is undoubtedly such an example for us all.

Words by Andrew Paine

The photographs were supplied by Mary Bennett.