

OBITUARY – Jill Lee Gibbs: 29 June 1935 – 4 November 2011

by Fr. Bill O'Shea

In her People segment, "Helping to Build a Better World" (Catholic Leader, 11/9/11), journalist Selina Venier wrote, having interviewed Jill Gibbs, "there are some conversations in life that could go on and on".

That was how she felt after spending just an hour with Jill and she expressed the hope that another conversation would follow.

Sadly, such was not to be the case, for Jill died peacefully at St. Vincent's Hospital, Brisbane, on 4 November, after a lengthy illness which she endured bravely, with great spirit and deep faith.

One can understand the interviewer's reaction because, by any standards, Jill lived a remarkable and fruitful life.

Born in Babinda, North Queensland, on 29 June 1935, she was educated at St. Ursula's College, Yeppoon. Having completed her schooling, she entered the nursing profession. While working at the Mater Hospital in Rockhampton, she felt the urge to undertake a different kind of service. A meeting with Bishop Francis Rush of Rockhampton resulted in her volunteering to go to the diocese of Wewak in Papua New Guinea as a lay missionary nurse. It was 1965, and Jill was then 29 years of age.

Her life-changing event came when she attended a retreat in the mid 1970s, conducted by members of Movement for a Better World (MBW), who had been invited to Wewak by Archbishop Arkfeld. This was a Movement founded by Italian Jesuit Riccardo Lombardi in 1952, with the active support and encouragement of Pope Pius XII.

It was (and is) a Movement that stated as its objective: "The communitarian renewal of Church and Society." Jill had attended several retreats for lay missionaries before, but this was different. She described it as "a real eye-opener for me – a heart opener as well."

On returning to Queensland, she undertook another MBW retreat, which affirmed her earlier experience. The result was that Jill decided in 1976 to become a full-time member of the group.

The Movement had already been active in Australia for some years, and a number of full-time and part-time members (bishops, priests, religious and lay-people) have come and gone. But Jill's involvement, in terms of length and strength of her commitment, far surpassed that of any other member. It became her whole life.

For the next 15 years, she travelled with other MBW members to parishes around Australia, giving retreats and later, assisting parishes (including several in Brisbane) to introduce a model of parish pastoral planning based on the Movement's principles. This was long before "pastoral planning" became fashionable.

During this period, she became a self-educated lay theologian, with a remarkable knowledge of the documents of the Second Vatican Council (she was very much a Vatican II person) and of the Scriptures.

Sr. Paul, the original lay missionary/theologian, was her favourite New Testament author, and she knew his writings intimately.

In 1991, Jill's commitment to the Movement was recognized with her election to the International Leadership Team based in Rome. She rose to become Executive Vice-Director of the International Leadership Team, a position she occupied for 8 years. Jill applied herself over these years to become proficient in language skills, particularly Italian, as well as Spanish, with some knowledge of French. She put her language skills at the service of the Movement not only verbally, but with an untiring commitment to translation of documents into English to make them more accessible internationally.

She spent 16 years in Rome, and had responsibility for English-speaking MBW groups around the world. Her travels, which involved the training and formation of local groups, took her several times to Africa (South Africa, Zimbabwe, Malawi), as well as to Scotland, India, Korea, Vietnam, The Philippines, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands.

She even gave a retreat to priests in South Korea, a remarkable achievement for a lay-woman in a religiously conservative church. During these Roman years, she managed to spend a few months each year working in Australia with the local groups.

In 2007, she returned to Australia permanently to work full-time with the Movement, now called (in Australia) *Community for A Better World (CBW)*. In these later years, she collaborated with Fr. Michael Fallon (a Brisbane Diocesan priest – then Director of the Australian group), in the production of the booklet "Journey Together", a resource for parish workers that has been very well received.

Jill "died with her boots on". Almost to the last days of her life, she sat at the table in her hospital ward with her laptop computer, still composing and polishing up new material about dialogue, participation and other aspects of her vision of Church, which will be part of her legacy.

Like her great mentor, Sr. Paul, she could be prickly, and alienated some people. She also could not abide what she saw as mediocrity, and found it hard to

understand that others could not be as “fired up” as she was. She loved the Church, but had a lot of reservations about the Vatican.

Although she was so single-minded and focussed on the MBW (CBW) vision of church and world, she did have other interests. Her family was very important to her and she valued spending time with them in Queensland, when she was able to make some holiday time. Wherever her sister and brother-in-law, Joan and Ron, resided, Jill had a home with them. She was a keen student of world politics, she was a real movie connoisseur, and she was mad about cricket!

Jill’s passing leaves a large gap in the lives of those who knew her and worked with her. Her close colleague over recent years, Fr. Michael Fallon, began his homily at her Farewell Mass by noting that “In various countries of the world, the news of Jill’s departure from among us has left many people thinking that the earth is a poorer place for her passing....”.

It was a remarkable journey from a young nurse from Rockhampton!