

Rogers, Father Ted

Nigel Hall, School of Social Work, Kingston University

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Summary

Father Ted Rogers was a remarkable and committed Jesuit priest who was instrumental in founding the first school of social work in the southern African country of Zimbabwe, then named Rhodesia. He remained as the Principal of the School of Social Work for 21 years and contributed to social development and poverty relief activities.

Throughout his life, Fr. Rogers saw it as a priority to work in areas of urgent social need and in tackling social injustice. In later years he was known and respected in southern Africa for his contribution to the effort to fight HIV/AIDS and his work toward peace and reconciliation.

Keywords: Zimbabwe, HIV/AIDS, social injustice, peace and reconciliation, social development, African social work

Subjects: Biographies

Early Life

The third of nine surviving children, Ted Rogers was born in Liverpool, United Kingdom, on November 9, 1924. Following an education with the Christian Brothers he joined the merchant navy as a midshipman at the age of 17 in 1941, taking part in wartime convoys to Ceylon and India, and surviving the sinking of one of his ships. He was later recognized with a medal for his contribution during the Battle of the Atlantic, as it became known.

That close encounter with death prompted him to ask what he could do with his life, and he decided to enter the priesthood following his demobilization. He trained as a Jesuit and was ordained in 1958. In 1961, the decision was made—without consultation or regard for the fact that he had never worked in Africa—for him to be posted to the southern African country of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).

Teaching in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe the Jesuits ran several parishes, schools, further education centers, and colleges, and initially Fr. Rogers worked as a teacher and then headmaster at St. Paul's Mission, Musami, Mashonaland East.

Fr. Rogers had been commissioned to investigate ways of tackling social problems, particularly among youth with lack of education and employment opportunities. He was able to secure the voluntary services of 20 local teachers from mainly White schools and in 1963 started St. Peter's

Community School (now St. Peter's Kubatana), taking 80 students for a two-year course leading to the External Junior Certificate.

School of Social Work

Although at that point he had no training in social work, Fr. Rogers realized the need to train students in group and community work that tied in with African social and family values. In February 1964, after deciding that young Black people needed to be trained in social work, he set up the School of Social Work in a disused school in Salisbury where, unusually (due to colonial and racist government policies which restricted where different ethnic groups could reside), Black and mixed-race persons were permitted to stay, initially with 18 students. This started with a practical one-year certificate course for group workers involved in clubs, welfare centers, and industrial and mining organizations, and Fr. Rogers undertook fund-raising both locally and internationally to develop this resource.

During that first year, the need for higher-level, full-time training became clear. Following consultation with the Oppenheimer College of Social Science in Zambia, the first-ever three-year diploma in social work was launched in 1966, also with an emphasis on group work (Chogugudza, 2009).

This was one of Fr. Roger's major achievements as the 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 who contributed social work skills in a variety of settings, including probation work; working with children, adults, refugees, and those with disabilities and mental health problems; and social development generally.

This was particularly helpful to the development of the country following Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, although unfortunately, due to the political and economic instability in the country brought about through the autocratic rule of Robert Mugabe and his Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front) (ZANU-PF) party, most social workers left the country in the 1990s and early 2000s to work in neighboring countries and in the United Kingdom. However, since then social work training has expanded and in the 2020s takes place at several universities in Zimbabwe.

Fr. Rogers remained the Principal of the school for 21 years and was later awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Zimbabwe in recognition of his contribution to social work.

A further achievement of his is that graduates from the school later went on to take leadership positions at the institution and in African social work more generally, contributing to publications in refereed journals and books and taking on director-level positions in social work at southern African universities (see Kaseke, 2005; Mupedziswa, 2014). Former students from the school have also taken on leadership positions in the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), (see Mugumbate, 2015; Muridzo, 2021).

Involvement in Development and Human Rights Activities

During the period of the Smith regime which was the colonial power ruling the country from 1965 to 1980, the 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 Fr. Rogers had a major part in organizing. He was also involved with the work of various charitable and nongovernmental organizations.

During the period of armed conflict, he also became involved with practical assistance to people in protected villages in the rural areas, such as the provision of food and blankets. He also worked with drought victims, refugees displaced by the civil war, and the families of political prisoners.

After the country's independence, this Commission exposed the deaths of 20,000 Ndebele civilians in Matabeleland by Robert Mugabe's army in the 1980s, a crime that still needs formal investigation. Fr. Rogers was also a founder member in 1993 of the Amani Trust, a nonprofit NGO dedicated to preventing organized violence and torture in Zimbabwe.

Tackling HIV/AIDS

Fr. Rogers retired as the Principal of the School of Social Work in 1985 and the following year took up a post as secretary to the Archbishop of Harare and was then tasked by the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC) to develop a program on HIV/AIDS, later helping set up the AIDS Counselling Trust (ACT). Fr. Rogers carried on his special interest in AIDS in his post (from 1988) as the director of the Inter-Regional Meeting of Bishops of Southern Africa (IMBISA) and visited and presented talks in various countries in the region.

Fr. Rogers also set up the Zimbabwe AIDS Orphans Project—a successful initiative which has assisted hundreds of children whose parents have died from AIDS. The project helps children attend school by providing necessary school fees, exam fees, basic uniforms, and stationery.

In the 1990s, Fr. Rogers continued his work on HIV/AIDS, 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 also worked with Shelter Trust, an organization headed by one of his former social work students that helped women who are at risk of abandoning their babies.

Later Years and Publications

Ill health had necessitated his return to the United Kingdom in 2011 and he was reassigned to one of the two Jesuit retirement homes in England, Corpus Christi Jesuit Community in Boscombe, Bournemouth.

In 2012, Fr. Rogers completed a remarkable memoir of his life in the first volume of a series of books on "Christian Lives in Africa" (Hall, 2016; Rogers, 2012). He notes in his Introduction that his main motivation for writing these memoirs was to recognize those who worked with and helped him, most on a voluntary basis.

In 2017, he wrote a second book (Rogers, 2017) which focused on the Catholic missionary priests and nuns who had been killed during the period of the struggle for independence in the country, and saw its publication just before his death at 93 years.

Fr. Rogers was always well respected, modest, and had a great sense of humor, and his contribution to the development of social work in Zimbabwe has been significant (The Times, 2018). He passed away on December 30, 2017, at the Jesuit retirement home.

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