

In Conversation with Sister Elizabeth Davis

Ken Tremblay



Although she denies it, Sister Elizabeth Davis, a member of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland and Labrador, is becoming a Canadian icon: in education, in healthcare, in leadership development, in social policy and in religious studies, in Canada and abroad. With teaching appointments and participation on many boards and commissions, she leaves a trail of wisdom, quiet successes and vocal fans in her wake. In 2001, she won the Catholic Health Care Association of Canada's Performance Citation Award and the Canadian Healthcare Association's Award for Excellence in Distinguished Service. Those were followed by an Honorary Doctor of Laws from Memorial University of Newfoundland, induction into the Alpha Sigma Nu Honour Society of Jesuit Educational Institutions and an appointment as a Member of the Order of Canada in 2004. Recently, the University of Toronto's Department of Health Policy, Management and Evaluation selected Sister Elizabeth as Leader of the Year for 2006. Ken Tremblay caught up with Sister Elizabeth at St. Augustine's

Seminary in Toronto, where she is currently teaching a course titled Introduction to the Old Testament.

HQ: Sister, your life with the Sisters of Mercy has been anything but traditional. From early roots in education, to healthcare leadership, to lifelong learning and doctoral studies, from small-town Newfoundland to international venues, from issues in contemporary society to religious studies of the Old Testament, from shaping minds to shaping policy and planning the future of a province, conversations with your general superior must be interesting?

Sister: [Chuckle] To say the least! The sisters have been very supportive of me and my career. They have congratulated me on many occasions, and they constantly challenge me to do more. You might think that they would say "stick to the knitting" and stop wandering. They have recognized that these vocational changes have been important to me. I have been very fortunate to have accumulated these experiences and been grounded in their diversity.

HQ: What has been your proudest moment?

Sister: Actually, I have never thought of that. I guess, in a paradoxical way, it was the experience in St. John's. Here we were, arguably in Canada's poorest province, making significant changes in the way we delivered care. Staff in 10 different organizations joined me in making the decisions that were in the best interest of healthcare, and they put those needs ahead of their own interests – the unions, physicians, staff members, managers, volunteers, board members. Witnessing that degree of commitment – people putting aside their personal interests in the best interest of the community, during a very difficult time – was witnessing a triumph of the human spirit. I was proud to be counted among them.

HQ: Of the many roles you have accepted, which ones did you enjoy the most and least?

Sister: No question about what I missed most – I miss teaching in the classroom. Teaching remains my first love, and this love has never waned. Indeed, I have found other ways to teach in healthcare. Times to share knowledge and to teach have been my most enjoyable moments.

I found administration difficult, especially when we had to implement difficult decisions – those that would negatively impact people – even though the decisions were right and necessary decisions. We had to reduce leadership positions, and I had to terminate the very people who had been helping me with the restructuring. I had to visit three facilities – good places with good people – to tell them that their facilities were scheduled for closure in order to support the system transformation we required. Those were very, very hard times for me.

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HQ: Your list of awards and honorary degrees is impressive. Which were the highlights?

Sister: Every time someone determined that what I did was deserving of one of these awards, it was because others walked with me – these awards belong to teams of people with whom I had the privilege to work. I have been very fortunate and blessed because these people have chosen to work with me. The honorary doctorate from Memorial University and the University of Toronto leadership award were overwhelming because my own crowd was bestowing the honour, telling me that I had fulfilled their leadership expectations. Receiving the Order of Canada was an important moment for me. The ceremony was

wonderful, but most moving was later that summer when the entire community where I come from, Fox Harbour, hosted a special evening to celebrate the honour with me.

HQ: You are the 2006 recipient of the University of Toronto's Department of Health Policy, Management and Evaluation Leadership Award. Any words of wisdom or lessons learned for this year's class and alumni?

Sister: The health administration program at the University of Toronto introduced me to healthcare. I have treasured what I learned in the program and the people whom I met because of the program. The healthcare system is more complex than most of us can understand, especially the linkages among and between its many elements. Everyone matters – the volunteers, nurses, physicians, therapists, technicians, board members, government and communities we serve. It is so complex that you quickly learn how little you know and how much you must keep learning throughout your career.

The [U of T] program gives you a general exposure to the system with the expectation that you will become a leader in healthcare and broader community. I take delight in the diversity of perspectives in the healthcare system – the more diverse the conversations, the stronger the people and, in turn, the system. I am grateful that the program opened my eyes to these vistas.

HQ: What is the source of your energy and drive? Any tips for the rest of us?

Sister: I don't know about that! I am blessed with a close family, a personal support network and a religious community that support me when I am vulnerable. Coming from a faith background has helped me to be me when I have needed strength and courage – knowing that there is a God who cared enough to create us, experiencing the joy of being part of teams where people put themselves second, continuing to learn and to be challenged.

It is easy to become complacent in one's life. We need gentle reminders that what is important is not knowing the answers, but knowing the questions. I have been blessed by people who have constantly challenged me to grow, to listen and to become a better leader.

HQ: Of the many characteristics that define you, which ones top the list?

Sister: Being a Newfoundlander means having a special way of seeing the world, a set of values of which I am unabashedly proud. From a leadership perspective, there are two: first, seeing and challenging others to see the bigger picture and the context of our larger reality; second, tenacious attention to achieving the vision. Within that larger vision, I don't see obstacles as barriers, but as challenges and opportunities.

HQ: How has your religious training made you a more effective leader?

Sister: As a member of the Sisters of Mercy, I know that no matter what I do or where I work, I do it as a response to an invitation to make this earth a better, more just and more peaceful place. I know that I am never doing this alone. God pours the spirit into each of us and gives us comfort and strength to do this work. The Bible is an added gift in our faith tradition containing stories about the people of faith in the community – crying, laughing, toiling – walking this journey together.

HQ: Recently, you have been teaching about value-based leadership. What do today's leaders need more of?

Sister: Healthcare leaders have many challenges each and every day, and we are expected to always get it right. We can be so beaten down by healthcare's challenges and its critics – from the system, from governments, from the public. Leaders need to know that they are making a difference and making a contribution. Leaders need assurances that they are doing good work.

But as well, they need to keep learning as few of us will get it perfectly right; we need to keep learning from others.

HQ: What is next for Sister Elizabeth?

Sister: Well, I am going to finish my doctorate. Then I plan to return to Newfoundland, to teach, to work with parishes and women's groups and to help others see the power of the scriptures to shape our community. Organized religion can have such an incredibly positive impact on our world, and religious works can build a true sense of community. Diversity should be used for what it was meant to do – shape community – not foster political or religious extremism.

HQ: If there was one thing that you wanted HQ readers to know about you, what would that be?

Sister: That I am so grateful for the opportunities I have had and the people I have met. They have helped me find ways “to make a difference.” **HQ**

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