

Obituary: Father Ted Rogers

Written by Administrator

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Liverpudlian priest who ignored death threats to train black social workers in the townships of pre-independence Rhodesia

When Father Ted Rogers set up a school in what was then Rhodesia to train young black people to become social workers his photograph was spat on, he was called a “kaffir-boetie” (lover of blacks) and told that he could be made to “disappear”.

His Jesuit superiors sent him to southern Africa in 1960 and charged him to do “social work” in the townships. Ignoring threats, the working class Liverpudlian decided it would be better to train young black people to do it instead and founded what is now the University of Zimbabwe’s School of Social Work in a disused school in Salisbury (now Harare) in 1964.

Although at that point he had no training in social work, Rogers instinctively realised the need to train students in community work that tied in with African social and family structures. In his later work in HIV/Aids he saw western medicine’s emphasis on confidentiality as a barrier because in traditional African society, the whole family would rally around an ill relative and help.

At the same time, Rogers was one of the first to speak publicly against the segregationist land acts of the prime minister Ian Smith and tracked atrocities against blacks by government forces. Priestly colleagues were deported or imprisoned under Smith’s white government and some priests were abducted and allegedly murdered by the nationalist opposition. Rogers remained as a witness to all the unrest that has broiled the nation ever since; a month before his death he published *Missionary Martyrs of Rhodesia and Zimbabwe 1976-1988*.

He also worked with drought victims, refugees displaced by the civil war and the families of political prisoners. With the coming of independence in 1980 and the end of civil war, Rogers was approached by the then president Canaan Banana to help in establishing training that would allow former combatants to return to civilian life and complete their education.

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Rogers started the Kushinga-Phikelela Agricultural Institute and he also helped to reopen rural schools and missions. He worked with the Justice and Peace Commission, which exposed the deaths of 20,000 Ndebele civilians in Matabeleland by Robert Mugabe's army in the 1980s.

Edward Rogers was born in Liverpool in 1924, the third of the nine children of Edward and Ellen, devout working-class Catholics. He was educated by the Christian Brothers and joined the wartime Merchant Navy at the age of 17. On his first voyage the ship was torpedoed and he spent four days, with 120 others, in blazing sun on two overcrowded lifeboats off the African coast.

That close encounter with death prompted him to ask what he could do with his life. The answer was to enter the priesthood. He trained as a Jesuit and worked with the Apostleship of the Sea in east London. He was ordained in 1958 and sent to Rhodesia in 1960.

Rogers retired as principal of the School of Social Work in 1985, but a year later he was asked by Zimbabwe's bishops to create an Aids programme in the face of denial, ignorance and lack of public understanding about the disease. The counselling, training, public information and education for young people that he set up in Zimbabwe rivalled anything in Britain. While deaths from Aids were running at 3,000 a week, infection rates dropped from about 30 per cent in 2000 to 17 per cent a decade later. His work on Aids expanded when he acted as director of the Inter-Regional Meeting of Bishops of Southern Africa for several years.

He returned to the UK in 2011 because of ill health and spent his retirement at the Corpus Christi Jesuit Community in Boscombe, Dorset, where increasing frailty never dampened his jollity and humour.

"After 51 years in Rhodesia and Zimbabwe I have left with three pairs of trousers, five shirts, two pairs of shoes, a four-year-old laptop and a camera," he said. "I am not just resigned, but peaceful and happy."

Father Ted Rogers SJ, Catholic priest and social activist, was born 9 November, 1924. He died on December 30, 2017, aged 93