Address given at the annual Sister Henrietta Stockdale Commemoration

St Cyprian’s Cathedral, 6 October 2015

Sister Henrietta Stockdale’s name is inscribed in the liturgical calendar of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa for this day, 6 October, which is the anniversary of her death in Kimberley in 1911. We have marked 6 October in an ecumenical way for a good number of years now, in partnership with the Anglican Church and the Historical Society of Kimberley and the Northern Cape, drawing the wider community into commemorating the life of this saintly pioneer of professional nursing. Today, the nursing college that is named in her honour plays an even greater role than ever before in these proceedings. It also initiated the inaugural Sister Henrietta Stockdale Memorial Lecture. The McGregor Museum hosts a temporary exhibition of documents and artefacts which illustrate her career. Probably the aspect of this day that Sister Henrietta would appreciate the most would not be the attention focused on herself, but rather the presence of nurses and the fact that nurses are being trained – professional nurses – a legacy which fulfills her vision.

Her claim to fame was her pioneering role in establishing professional nursing and the state registration of nurses in South Africa. (For more information on this, read the article by Charlotte Searle in the Dictionary of South African Biography.) She was responsible for training nurses in Kimberley who then set out to help establish new hospitals elsewhere. As a result of her vision and drive, and her setting the highest standards, South Africa became the first country in the world to provide for the state registration of nurses and midwives, which was legislated in Act 34 of 1891.

Sister Henrietta served as Matron of the Carnarvon Hospital in Kimberley, the forerunner of the present Kimberley Hospital, from 1879-1895.

She had come out from England as a nursing volunteer, aged 27, in 1874, having responded to an invitation from Bishop Webb of Bloemfontein. A community of Anglican nurses and teachers formed themselves into the Community of St Michael and All Angels in Bloemfontein.

When Miss Stockdale was admitted to full membership of the order in 1875, she was henceforth known simply as Sister Henrietta. Her first visit to Kimberley was in the winter of 1876. She soon returned and set up South Africa’s first training school for nurses at the Carnarvon Hospital.

She lived her last years with the sisterhood at their house here in Kimberley, and she would worship both at St Cyprian’s (then in a wood and iron building in Jones Street), and at the hospital chapel (built at her instigation in 1887), which is filled with remembrances of the days when the St Michael’s sisters contributed so much to nursing here, and from Kimberley, countrywide.

Sister Henrietta died after a short illness in 1911.

An obituary in the Cape Argus suggested that “Sister Henrietta has done more for South Africa than perhaps any other one woman. She has opened a door of usefulness by pointing out … work which … greatly enriches the world. She has lived to see the fruits of her labours, and as she wished, she has died ‘full of work and days’.”

Memorials there are to her memory. Besides the nursing college established in her name, there is the chapel for which she was responsible at Kimberley Hospital. It is from there that a now traditional street march proceeds every year on this day, as a kind of pilgrimage, to a wreath-laying and thanksgiving at St Cyprian’s Cathedral. The cathedral itself has a fine stained-glass window which memorialises her passing, while the statue in the cathedral grounds was to become the place to which her mortal remains, and those of fellow nursing sisters, Mother Emma, and nurse Mary Hirst Watkins, were later brought – a final resting place.

If Sister Henrietta’s soul is at rest, her spirit is alive.

Indeed it is the living legacy, the active, ongoing delivery of health care to ordinary people - quoting the Very Revd Simon Aiken, former Dean of Kimberley - which is the more fitting memorial; with the nurturing of young people to take up the lamp and to pledge their service.

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