

Nola, Tony, and Merrilyn: A Trio of New Zealand Women Leaders

Beulah Wood

Three nurturing women with remarkably different positions and talents feature in my latest book, *They Carved a Wider Path for Women: 36 New Zealand Baptist Women Leaders*. Nola Ivory, born in 1904, was a missionary in Bangladesh and India in times of war, famine, and the partition of India. Tony Wansbrough, born in 1941, became an activist pushing for a better deal for migrants. The third, Merrilyn Withers, loved youth into the kingdom of God as a regional and then national youth director. Interestingly, they were all Baptist.

Nola Ivory (1904–1988)

Nola Ivory was the first woman doctor in the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society (NZBMS), serving from 1931 to 1961. She superintended two hospitals, initiated clinics and dispensaries, shared her faith in and love of Jesus the healer, and translated Scripture.

Her time in East Bengal (later Bangladesh) and Tripura (northeast India) coincided with serious disruption for the region: The Burma-adjacent war zone of World War II, severe famine and related issues that ended the lives of two to three million people in 1943, and the violence in 1947 when Britain granted independence and partitioned the area to form the new state of East Pakistan, causing ten to twelve million people to be displaced, with much loss of life.

Chandpur

Nola left New Zealand by boat for Mumbai (west central India) in 1931, taking then a multiple-day train trip to Calcutta (east India), followed by another train, a river steamer, and a dinghy to reach the mission hospital in the river town of Chandpur, south of Dhaka (in present day Bangladesh). After two years of Bengali study, she became the superintendent of the mission hospital with a focus on women, as the government clinics and hospital served men only.

The beginning was stressful. Her first task was to cut the hospital budget by one third, due to the fund decrease of the 1930s Depression. Under her leadership, the hospital grew despite having to keep in good order fourteen buildings—nurses' quarters, main ward, separate wards, and a dispensary, plus the compound's fences, all on NZ\$60 a year. Nola trained Bengali women as nurses and upskilled village midwives. Her days were full. Hundreds of women and children had cause to thank God for Dr Ivory's skill. She gave attention to each because she cared.

On leave in New Zealand in 1935, Nola inspired with her talks. She returned for a second four-year term (1938–1942) in Chandpur, although limited by ill health and the unease of war in nearby Burma. These had made her stay in New Zealand for three years, during which she was medical superintendent at a small hospital near Wellington. But she dreamed of East Bengal and the Hindu princely state of Tripura.

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but fruitful for Nola and her team
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Agartala

The return to Bengal signalled big changes when the Maharaja of Tripura permitted a land purchase by New Zealand missionaries for a mission station in Agartala, the capital. By 1946, Nola was seeing outpatients in a downstairs room of the building where she lived with another single woman, and she soon opened an inpatient bamboo ward with beds for six patients. She was so concerned for their needs.

Many people in Agartala were Bengali, but Nola's love and concern centred on the tribal groups of Reang, Jamatia, Tripuri (also called Kokborok, the largest group), Garo, and Halam. She knew there was no medical attention in remote villages and that women could not travel for medical attention. She longed to work in a more remote village but had to prioritise the need for a base in Agartala. For a while, Nola kept the small hospital going while also holding clinics fifty kilometres to the east at outpost Haoabari, beyond the first range of hills. She saw the great needs of people. Getting there was a mission in itself—thirty hours of circuitous driving through jungle, then a walk up a valley. This did not stop Nola.

But there was political trouble. In 1947 came the partition and independence of India. East Bengal became East Pakistan with the long-standing mission stations Chandpur and Brahmanbaria, while nearby Tripura remained in India. Refugees flooded into Agartala. Nola and the team spent long hours, six days a week, for years, striving to serve these needy people. Nola, often to the desperation of her missionary colleagues, tried to squeeze in more inpatients, and a maze of bamboo huts (additional wards) sprang up overnight within the mission compound. "We must protect Nola from herself," her colleagues kept saying, as they tried to keep the patients to a manageable number. But annual outpatients grew to 26,000 and inpatients to several hundred. The years 1949 to 1958 were busy but fruitful for Nola and her team with medical work, staff training, and bringing the good news of Christ.

Hachupara

When, in 1956, NZBMS sent another doctor to the hospital in Agartala, Nola felt free to fulfil her heart's desire for a clinic in a still further outlying village to offer medicine and the gospel. Tripura Christians advised the village of Hachupara, 100 kilometres south

of Agartala—a two-hour jungle journey by jeep, then a one-hour jungle walk. River crossings used two boats lashed together as a deck for the jeep, while two men with poles pushed the contraption across the river. The road almost disappeared in the tropical growth and a muddy rice field to reach Nola's new home in a wilderness of rainforest trees and animals. Nola trekked the jungle tracks, crossed rivers and climbed jungle-clad hills. She coped with swarms of mosquitoes. Elephants, tigers, deer, boar, and black bears roamed among bright birds and flowers. Feeling deeply God's presence, Nola and team learned the customs of the poorest and neediest in the Reang tribe.

Assisted by an elementary pharmacist, Dhiren Marak and his wife who helped with medicines and patient care, Nola ministered to these poorest people. Her home, bed, and dispensary were bamboo rods. The floor was bamboo slats, and chickens under the house pecked at the kitchen scraps that fell through. In time, there were two staff houses, a dispensary and a twelve-bed hospital—all built of jungle bamboo. Nola loved the place, the medical work and the spiritual input. She especially loved the people. She treated burns, broken limbs, dysenteries, worms, and delivered babies. She learned the Reang language and translated some of the NT into Reang. She was delighted when seven young men and two women joyfully received baptism in the village pond.

While the work was flourishing Nola was aging. Then, in 1961, she fell while chasing a rat in a kitchen and broke her leg in two places. Her jungle home was no place for someone her age now limited in her walking. The mission decided she should retire from such an isolated place. This greatly annoyed Nola. She was in the middle of teaching a series on the OT during the weekly prayer meeting, translating into Reang, and undertaking farming experiments. She did feel encouraged by a new schoolmaster who could continue Christian work. "It's not the end for Hachupara," she said.

Assigned Home to New Zealand

Back in New Zealand, Nola settled in New Plymouth and took a job for a while in "Accident and Emergency" in the local hospital. She loved it when she could speak of Jesus as healer. When she retired, she would go and help the hospital gardeners pull weeds and clear rubbish. Church friends advised her not to continue driving, but she bought a car anyway and treated it as a person. The friends wrote, rather amused, of Nola's personality in their obituary following her death in 1988:

Nola was a lady of singular intensity of purpose. (Some still speak in awed tones of her unusual relationship with her car, bought somewhat against advice.) She was a kind and gentle persuader, whose life witness more than equalled her words. Her knowledge of the Bible, her faith and her Master was that of an enthusiastic doer of the creed. Her faith was of the heart as well as the head. She cared little for her own needs, to the point of not accepting that she had any. Others' needs were without question greater than her own. In ways practical as well as spiritual, she worked to build up the Church of God. She loved good books and read avidly and widely. She was a better-than-average painter in water colours and great at hand-crafts. In these and in all ways, she strove always to do better, to serve better, to live better. She felt she

owed so much to her Lord and Master and that there was always far to go to repay the debt.

Nola must have been a "character," but what a loving, self-sacrificing woman!

Next, we have a doctor who cared enormously about a better deal for asylum seekers.

In her teenage years, Tony obtained a scholarship to train to become a doctor. She moved to Wellington, New Zealand, in 1969 to work as a registrar in ophthalmology.

Tony Wansbrough (1941–present)

Tony was born in 1941 in Adelaide, Australia, where her father Siegfried Albrecht worked in munitions for the war effort. The little girl faced large health problems, first with rheumatic fever at age three. Apparently, she did not like the people with white coats talking *about* her but not *to* her. She decided to be a doctor when she grew up, a good doctor who would talk to her patients. That indicates the battler Tony became.

At three years old Tony went to Sunday School, although her parents had only a residual belief in God. She learned that Jesus loved little children and he loved her. The memory remains vivid today. "Don't underestimate pre-schoolers," she says.

A second health crisis arrived in the form of polio. Tony was in hospital and convalescing at home from the age of nine to eleven. "I experienced genuine impartial love from the nurses," she says, "and I felt its importance ever after." But it was a lonely childhood, and she lagged behind physically. Home was often stressful, too, as her father was alcoholic and disruptive. He had reached Australia from Germany in 1928 at the age of eighteen and never saw his family again. During World War II he was ostracised for being German and felt conflicted and often distressed.

Career and Marriage

In her teenage years, Tony obtained a scholarship to train to become a doctor. She moved to Wellington, New Zealand, in 1969 to work as a registrar in ophthalmology, although later she gave up her job as registrar. She took work in New Zealand as a general practitioner doctor and married industrial chemist Norman Wansbrough. Tony and Norman were keen to find ways to help others. For some years, they volunteered with Birthright, a mentoring programme for struggling families. They also loved the outdoors and hiked extensively, despite Tony's polio-reduced lung capacity. When they transferred to Auckland, they, in a pernickety way, attended four churches before choosing broad-minded Ponsonby Baptist.

Tony worked as a general practitioner briefly before her son Keith and daughter Heather were born in the 1970s. She returned to professional life by working in public health. She spent fifteen years as an official medical officer, mainly in child health, and later, for a further fifteen years, in the control of infectious diseases. For this work, Tony was often among new migrants and so developed a huge concern and advocacy for asylum seekers. As a doctor, she documented signs of torture to substantiate their claims to be accepted as refugees with political asylum. She often needed to give prescriptions for mental health.

Asylum Seekers

People who arrived as recognised refugees could become permanent residents in New Zealand, but asylum seekers were different. They had arrived in New Zealand claiming asylum and seeking refugee status. They had to wait for legal investigation of their claim. They could stay, but often with no work permit and therefore no income. At that stage there were up to 900 asylum seekers arriving in New Zealand each year. Deciding to help this group, Tony took a job working six half-days a week, so she had time for voluntary work. She became a remarkable advocate, thoroughly conversant with the legalities around residential status, benefits, and housing. She often collaborated with the International Red Cross to help bring other family members to New Zealand when refugee status had been approved.

The Auckland Asylum Seekers' Trust ran a hostel with twelve bedrooms and social support, but it was far too small. Some people could stay with their own community, whereas some were seriously deprived, as no government department took responsibility for them. One Somali woman whom Tony helped arrived obviously pregnant. Interviewed at the airport for seven hours, she was then told, "You can go now." "Where to?" she asked. Shrug. She was cared for by nuns for one night, slept rough for another, then had labour pains. The hostel was full. Someone sent for Dr. Tony. With Tony and Norman's connections, they phoned a Somali community leader who found a Somali family to host her. Other women in similar circumstances had miscarriages. Existence was so stressful for many that if they finally received acceptance for New Zealand, they would break down and cry.

Tony set up "Circles of Friends," people she persuaded to pledge rent and food for asylum-seeking families. Their own family did too. Daughter Heather recalls coming home from university for an evening to find no cutlery in the drawers. It had gone to the latest person in need. Starting in 1998, Tony became for years an advocate/activist with government departments pushing for better care of asylum seekers. "Shouldn't they at least be allowed to take jobs and earn to stay alive?" she argued. She then saw another stress point. If a man had two or more wives and New Zealand law said he could bring only one, what was he supposed to do? Desert the other(s), leaving them no support? The efforts of Tony and others made a law change that helped religious minorities and people who had spoken against the regime in Iran, Burma, Sri Lanka, Syria, Somalia, etc.

Tony's next advocacy push aimed at health boards. Asylum seekers got no health care because they were not citizens and thus had to pay full fees, money they did not have. Tony stood at health

desks with asylum seekers to argue their legitimate need for care. General maternity care was also refused, but at least if a woman went into labour she was given a safe delivery. Tony's advocacy made a huge difference.

"What have you learned through all this advocacy, Tony?" "I have learned great respect for the resilience of people," she says. "I am enriched through the culture of others. I experience the joy of being invited to sit at an African woman's fireside." Tony retired, but still she was a go-to person for many nonmedical needs among Auckland's asylum seekers. They still gratefully invite her to weddings. That is so satisfying to Tony. "I'm most gratified when I see people whom I have helped settle well," she says.

Hospitality

Norman and Tony always ran a hospitable home, taking in people who needed a place to stay for months or years—friends of her children, prisoners on parole, or out-of-town theological students. They kept in contact with a great many.

Then there were the prisoners. A lifer advertised in a Christian newspaper for a picture Bible. Norman and Tony responded. He invited them to visit him in prison, and they visited him for years. In the 1990s, a woman in a computer class asked Norman to visit her husband who was in prison on drunk driving charges. Norman went. On conditional release, the man stayed seven months with Norman and Tony, studying plumbing and practising guitar to play in church! The couple helped him gain work and arranged for counselling while he still had the prison bracelet on his ankle.

Then Tony heard about the deserted wife of a migrant to New Zealand, stranded in Zimbabwe. Tony gave her money, still in Zimbabwe, to buy a sewing machine so she could support herself and her children. Why did Tony work so hard helping people from other countries?" She replies,

It was because of my own life experience. As a Christian, I met thoughtful lay and ministry thinkers who persuaded me to love my neighbour as deeply as I loved myself. It's expressed beautifully in my all-time favourite Christian song, "Brother, sister, let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you. Pray that I might have the grace to let you be my servant, too."¹ I love that. Reciprocity is a beautiful thing. We are here to help each other. Even more than desiring to be leaders, we need to desire to be people who care for one another.

Tony's advocacy and activism nurtured and changed the lives of hundreds of asylum seekers and their family members.

The third story in the trio follows a youth worker.

Merrilyn Withers (1951–present)

From early in her working life, Merrilyn Withers had to defend her actions. As a young high school teacher of English, French, and History in Victoria, Australia, she led the youth group in her Methodist church. However, she met trouble when she wanted to receive believer's baptism facilitated by the minister of the nearby Baptist church. Wonderfully, many of the kids from school came

for the service, but her church suspended her membership until she admitted she had done wrong. “You may as well cancel it now,” she retorted. They promptly cancelled her membership and dissociated her from the youth group. So, the youth went on strike, complete with placards. With nobody else available, the church reinstated Merrilyn as the youth leader—but not as a member!

Merrilyn was born in 1951 in a happy, stable family in the town of Wangaratta, Victoria. The church they attended offered little for young people but did run camps at Christmas and Easter, and at one of these Merrilyn was converted at age fifteen. She comments, “It was a move of God. For the next eight years I served as a camp leader, wanting to give back something of what I’d received.”

Bible College and a Hundred Dollars a Week

As a graduate with a BA and DipEd from Melbourne University, and following three years of teaching, Merrilyn applied to the Bible College of New Zealand in Auckland, seeking a course of study that was both theological and practical. Suddenly, Merrilyn’s father died. She hesitated, but felt God gave her the words from Genesis 12, “Leave your country and go to the country I’m leading you to, and there I will bless you and make you a blessing.” She came to New Zealand for the course, and it felt easy to settle here.

Graduated with honours in church history, Merrilyn’s first job was as pastoral assistant at Wellington South Baptist Church where she ran a youth drop-in centre. Opportunities for youth ministry exploded before her and she soon cared for many young people, including street kids. “Yes,” she realised, “youth work is my calling and passion!” Once she was invited to a *marae*, a Maori village. At 9:00 p.m., at the end of a dark road, her eighteen-year-old guide took her to a room lined with rows of machetes! “What am I at risk of?” she wondered. It turned out they were for cutting gorse—a thick shrub with sharp spiked leaves. Relief! This young man later visited her office saying, “I’m going to kill my stepdad.” She understood his hostility but tried to help him. She even offered unlimited McDonald’s takeaways as a diversion. He said, “It’s no use, Merr. Come and see me in borstal.”² As he walked away, Merrilyn yelled his name and shouted, “Do you want to be wanted for murder?” He stood and hesitated a long time, eventually walking back saying, “I’d rather be wanted for murder than never wanted at all.”

That conversation was pivotal. Merrilyn determined in her spirit that no young person would ever cross paths with her and leave without knowing somebody cared for them. She went the second mile and more, for the young people she encountered. Somebody asked, “What made young people like and trust Merrilyn?” It seems the answer was simply that she loved them.

After two years at her first church posting, Merrilyn resigned to work for a year as a volunteer for the Baptist national youth centre. At a conference late in 1981, an acquaintance told Merrilyn that they needed a Baptist youth director for Christchurch city. “I’d do it for you,” she said lightly. “Give me a hundred dollars a week and an office.” It was a throw-away remark. Three weeks later the person rang her, saying, “We’ve got an office and two hundred dollars. Will you come?” She went, and after only three months was called as the full-time Canterbury/Westland Regional Youth Director, a position she relished for six years.

In 1987, Merrilyn visited USA for a youth conference and postgraduate study at Fuller Theological Seminary for six months, followed by backpacking around South America. She loved it. It was rejuvenating. Some years later, she took teenagers on mission trips to India, Bangladesh, and the Philippines, wanting young people to see something of the rest of world—to observe, ask questions, and see life in other places.

Companionship and Youth Leadership

Merrilyn embraced singleness, never feeling “incomplete.” She felt being unmarried enabled her to focus on ministry she could not otherwise have done. She noted that if she had been married, she would have wanted children, and the culture of that time and place did not enable both ministry and children. She prayed for spiritual children and companionship against loneliness—and received both. Her sister Dawn, seven years younger, became more than sister as a supportive friend and fellow worker. Dawn moved to New Zealand in 1985 as a youth worker for Avonhead Baptist Church in Christchurch. The sisters paired up in enormous support for each other from that time on and eventually bought a house together near Wellington where Dawn was a youth pastor and Merrilyn became Wellington regional and national youth leader.

Merrilyn returned to Fuller for a time, then in 1989 the Wellington Baptist Association invited her to come as their regional youth director, a new role and shaped by her, facilitating and encouraging youth ministry in local churches. She trained leaders, ran regional Easter camps, school holiday May and August camps, and intermediate level camps. She offered consultations with church leaders, preached, led Bible studies, and provided ideas, materials, and services. Nationally, she was an advisor and spokesperson, with a team of youth advocates from around the country grappling with issues of modern youth ministry.

It was an up-and-down task. One difficult aspect was to see the potential for youth ministry and then not be able to draw sufficient leaders with the vision to make it happen. At times, she felt heart-broken that churches had no youth leaders, or she saw youth suffer through division in a church or youth group with nobody to bring them to Jesus. At low moments Merrilyn said, “It’s like pushing mud uphill with a rake!” She tried to keep stress at bay by watching movies and knitting. But many positive things were happening too. Youth workers became excited about ministry, and new youth leaders made a difference. And Merr (as she was often called) loved the camps—they were hard work, but kids’ lives were touched and changed. They proved to her of the value of a nurturing attitude in youth work.

One Good Friday at an Easter camp, Merrilyn’s team brought in a huge cross made from telegraph poles. They gave each young person a page with the verse from Isaiah 53, “He was pierced for our transgressions.” “Think about it,” she said. “If you know it’s true for you, sign the paper and nail it to the cross.” By Sunday night, when most of the kids had gone, Merrilyn knelt by the cross to take communion. She was near tears with exhaustion. “When you get lonely or tired or criticised for petty things,” she notes, “you can wonder if it’s all worth it.” She glanced up at the cross towering above and saw the names—kids she knew and loved and had seen her youth leaders work with. It felt as if God was saying, “Merrilyn, you’re doing this for me. You’re investing

yourself in these kids' lives. In the end that's all that counts." She knew she could go on, even when shattered from fatigue.

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Marilyn, the Youth Pastor?

Asked what made her a good youth pastor, Marilyn says, "In fact probably Dawn was better at local youth pastoring. She loved the kids and put herself out enormously for them. My task as regional leader was more about strategy, planning, training, and speaking. In the 1980s and 1990s we had some great synergy around supporting and encouraging youth pastors."

But it was still a time of opposition to women leading in Baptist ministry. While some people who would normally be hostile overlooked her leadership because she was not trying to be a senior pastor, some objected. It was hurtful at times. Hayden Allen, later a pastor at Upper Hutt Baptist, told of going as a teen to a Baptist Youth Movement event in 1994 or 1995, with the default view that women must not lead, preach, or teach. He heard Marilyn speak and felt the effect of her words. As he sat there, he mused, "Okay, God's clearly using her. I must examine my parents' theology about women as leaders. You can't deny experience. It was like Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:25-48)." He felt young people could see the love that Marilyn and Dawn had for young people. It was not a job—it was a passion fuelled by that genuine love.

Hayden says, "Merr used to say, 'People don't care what you know till they know that you care.' Her teaching changed me. I learned that youth work is a separate field and worthy of specific training. In the past youth leaders burnt out in youth work or grew up and did adult work. Merr made me see that youth work has its own calling."

Heather Ameye-Bevers, a later national youth advisor, said of Marilyn's style of ministry, "She had an amazing ability to relate to young people. She told stories of her own teenage years, hilarious or painful. She had a great sense of humour, fun in her voice, was often self-deprecating and highly relational. In the 1980s people prayed for youth but did not counsel. Marilyn supplied both. She used cartoons, mirth and revelation. Merr was a gift to us. I hate to think where we'd be in youth work without her."

Later Times

In the 2000s, Dawn contracted terminal cancer and died in 2012. This was the hardest time for Marilyn. It felt like a walk through the dark as she nursed Dawn, and God did not always feel close. Exodus 20:21 was significant to her; God was found by Moses in the thick darkness.

Nowadays there are more hard times. Marilyn faces a growing neurological disorder and holds on to God. "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Deut 31:6) are words that keep her going, along with the love and support of others. Marilyn is semi-retired in Lower Hutt but still involved in youth ministry—speaking, running a discipleship camp, and volunteering in her local youth group.

"People come up to me in a supermarket and thank me for the help given 30 or 40 years ago. I mostly recognise them among the thousands of names I memorised. I look into the adult eyes of kids I knew. It's hard concerning those who have not kept the faith, but I live with gratitude." We suspect there are thousands who are deeply grateful for Merr's life. In 2025, she received the King's Service Medal in the King's Birthday Honours List. Warm thoughts of her came from all around such as: "Whenever I am with Marilyn, young people are constantly coming up to give her a hug, to thank her for a card, a text or a phone call when she had encouraged them. She is a legend."

"Some believe that to engage young people you had to be fashionable or cool—Merr wasn't! Instead, she won young people over with authenticity and love." "She was instrumental in helping to ground (my teenage children's) faith in a God who wasn't just there in the good times but also in the tough ones." "Merr's love for everyone and her selflessness to give and serve make her a beacon of light to people. . ."

Conclusion

Nola, Tony, and Marilyn: These three women nurtured deeply, investing their life in the life of others. But often their task was not a traditional task for women, even though women are seen as nurturing. They often had to shape a place to work and that needed a Christian virtue we often fail to speak of—courage. May we too live with the courage and compassion of Christ that we can see in these women.

Notes

1. Richard Gillard, "The Servant Song" (Universal Music: Brentwood Benson Publishing, 1977).
2. A borstal is a youth detention center.

Sources for Stories

On Nola Ivory: M. J. Eade and S. L. Edgar, *Toward the Sunrise* (1985) 184–92; NZ Baptist (Feb 1960, July 1960, Nov 1960, June 1961, Dec 1961, Nov 1988); "Greendale News," *The Press* (June 22, 1936); "Baptist Tabernacle," *Poverty Bay Herald* (Sept 3, 1936); "Missionary Union," *The NZ Herald* (Sept 19, 1936).

On Tony Wansbrough: Interviewed by the author in November 2020.

On Marilyn Withers: NZ Baptist (Apr 1995); interview with the author (Jan 18, 2022); conversation with Heather Ameye-Bevers (ca. August 2023).



Beulah Wood (BA, BD, DMin) was widowed in 1980 while serving in Nepal. Later teaching Preaching and Theology of Family in India, Beulah encouraged and enabled leadership among Indian women. The mother of four and grandmother of ten, Beulah was President of the Baptist Churches of New Zealand in 2019.