

“Community serving humanity”.

Paddy Kearney - social justice activist, religious leader and author. Died in Durban: 23 November 2018.

Born in August 1942 in Pietermaritzburg, Gerald Patrick Kearney, known always as ‘Paddy’, epitomised grace, integrity, humility and compassion. He was an astute and visionary campaigner, working for peace and justice across five decades.

Just like his later mentor Archbishop Hurley, Paddy was educated at St Charles College in PMB, at the time a Marist school. He initially pursued a religious vocation with the Marists and, though he left the order after 12 years, spent the rest of his life in the service of the Church.

In 1971, Paddy was employed at Inanda Seminary, an all-girls school for black students, where he was exposed to the injustices of Apartheid in personal detail and where he became an activist for justice. After completing his Arts Degree and Education Diploma at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg he undertook postgraduate studies in the USA and Mexico.

For almost 30 years, Paddy headed the work of Diakonia, an organisation founded by Archbishop Denis Hurley in 1976. Unusually for that time, this organisation brought together Christians of different denominations to work in partnership. They trained people to set up and run social action groups in the struggle against Apartheid in the 1980s. This attracted the attention of the security forces: Diakonia offices were raided and staff were harassed. In 1985, Paddy was detained without charge by the security police. This led to a historic court case in which Archbishop Hurley successfully challenged the notorious ‘Section 29’. This not only meant that Paddy was freed (after 17 days) but also set a legal precedent that helped later detainees.

At an age when most other men retire, Paddy initiated the last great project of his life - the creation of the Denis Hurley Centre. This stands as a living legacy to his hero by bringing together people of different faiths to provide care, education and community to the poorest and most marginalised in central Durban. Paddy oversaw the building of the R32 million structure and has chaired the Trustees through the Centre’s first four years of operations.

In addition to his work at the helm of Diakonia and the Denis Hurley Centre, Paddy has served on a myriad NGOs, boards, organisations and civil society bodies. Most recently, he has been Chair of the Gandhi Development Trust, an advisor to the KZN Christian Council, a member of the Province Commissions on Social Cohesion and Xenophobia, and a founding force of the Active Citizens Movement. A collection of Paddy’s own writings has been published and he has also written three internationally-acclaimed books on Denis Hurley, the last of which (an edited collection of letters) was launched only in the last few weeks. He has been awarded honorary doctorates by the University of KwaZulu-Natal and St Augustine’s College, and a Papal medal ‘Bene Merenti’ by Pope Francis. In 2014, eThekweni Municipality honoured him with the title ‘Living Legend’.

Though not an ordained minister, Paddy Kearney was one of the most influential religious leaders in South Africa in the second half of the twentieth century. He played a significant role in opposing Apartheid and continued to promote the vision of a just society and the need to work actively to serve our poorest fellow-citizens. He is mourned by his brothers, Brian and Jack, and their families, and by the many people whom he inspired.