

VOICES FROM THE MINISTRIES

Sisters Lucy MacNeil and Stella Chafe are the last Marthas to minister in Inverness. They were missioned there after they had already retired from their professional teaching careers. Sisters of St. Martha service in Inverness evolved over the years and their final ministry was what they call ‘the ministry of presence’ – being there for the people whenever they were needed.



Sr. Lucy



Sr. Stella

“I must say that it was a gift from heaven to me to come down here”, says Sr. Stella, *“people were so open to me, so welcoming!”*. A few months before the pandemic, in November 2019, she came to St. Mary’s Convent to live with Sr. Lucy who had settled there 7 years prior. Sr. Stella credits the warm welcome of the Inverness people to the years of Sr. Lucy’s service, but Sister Lucy is first to say that she has just continued the good work of many other Marthas who had served before her. They both are adamant in their sentiment that the Inverness ministry story is not about them or any one person in particular but encompasses 97 years of hard work and devotion of all the Sisters who ministered in the area in the spirit of Gospel Hospitality. From different types of

hospital work, through Parish Ministry Team endeavors, to the latest ministry, the Marthas have been around throughout many people’s lifetime and have touched the lives of countless locals. In recent years, the ministry has evolved into what Sisters Lucy and Stella call “ministry of presence”. By frequenting services in both Catholic and United churches, they got to know people from the community and their families so, naturally, they would find out when somebody died, got sick, or was looking for support. They also remember long chats with the locals on their daily walks around the coastal town and their encounters with the Co-op staff and customers when shopping. They both reached out to people and made themselves available and present to those



St. Mary's Convent, Inverness, 1999

who needed checking in, a listening ear, or a prayer. Twice a week, Sisters went to The Inverary Manor, a long-term care facility in Inverness, to provide companionship to the residents. Those visits are one of their many favorite memories from Inverness and something they will both miss a lot:

How happy the residents are to see us! You get to know them personally, and there is a number of them that have died, and we'd go to the wakes...

But it's just the joy that you see in their faces when you go.

~Sr. Stella

We used to go see her [a resident in the Manor] all the time. One day I went in, and she gave me a bracelet and said "Dear Sister Lucy, I want you to have this, my daughter sent it home from Calgary and she said to give it to you because you're just like a mother to me". And she was 94!!!!

~Sr. Lucy

During their years in Inverness, Sisters also attended wakes, visited or called people, and helped in many other small but meaningful ways. St. Mary's Convent

opened about 40 years ago and had always been very much an open house where people could and would drop in for tea & cookies and a friendly chat. During the pandemic lockdowns, the phone calls substituted the visits. Over the years, there were regulars from the community dropping in, members of the local clergy visiting on a weekly basis, and many visitors from away. Making guests comfortable and getting to know people for who they really are is something Sisters Stella and Lucy have enjoyed a lot. Inviting people for freshly baked goods and nice conversation is natural to them. Both have always treated everyone, regardless their faith or current life situation, with respect and care. In return, the community cared for them. When Sister Lucy was in Inverness by herself for over a year, the people looked after her, a local priest, Father Dan MacDonald, called every morning to make sure she was alright. Several parishioners expressed their sadness upon learning that Sisters Lucy and Stella would be leaving Inverness. For

VOICES FROM THE MINISTRIES *continued*

many, Marthas were there all their lives, serving the community. Simply put, their presence mattered:

“We didn’t feel like we did a whole lot. But we were there for them. [...] You don’t realize that it’s such a natural thing with us [Marthas]. And yet it means so much to the people”
~Sr. Stella

For both Sisters, the Inverness ministry fit very well with their personalities. Both had been teachers with experience in leadership and helping people thrive was the essence of their careers. Going further back in time, becoming a Martha and following the Martha way of life was natural for both.



Sister Lucy MacNeil, 89, was born in Dominion, Cape Breton, the eighth in the family of 12 children. As a child, she knew the Marthas who were social workers in her parish, and she

often visited St. Charles Convent for choir practice. She remembers the happy Sisters who lived there and the feeling of being always welcome in their house. Sr. Lucy entered the Congregation at 21 years old, a year after high school. She studied in Normal College in Truro and went on to teaching Grade Primary class in 1955. She taught for 41 years in many different schools around Nova Scotia and in Kamloops, BC and assures she loved every day of it! To this day, when she sees a school bus passing by in the morning, she misses being at school, greeting the

children. Patience, compassion, and being an excellent listener earned her the trust of the 5-year-olds and proved excellent qualities in all her other assignments, including working on the Bethany Leadership Team, being a local treasurer in several communities, and, later on, in her work with the people of the Inverness area.

Sister Stella Chafe, 85, had also known the Marthas since she was a child. Born in Antigonish and raised in Canso, NS, she used to go over to the Martha convent in town for choir practice, music lessons,



and Holy Mass in a chapel. *“It didn’t matter what time of the day we went; they were always so welcoming. They taught crafts there, so there were people in and out at all times”*, she reminisces. A true life-transforming experience for Sr. Stella was her two years in St. Joseph Convent School in Mabou, NS, a boarding facility led then by the Sisters of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame. Combining “school and religion” was new and appealing and it fostered her desire to go into religious life and carry on some of the work that religious did. She was attracted to the Sisters of St. Martha whom she admired for their *“earthiness and getting down where the people were”*. Her experience in boarding school, with its highly structured daily routine of study, work, and prayer, prepared her for the new life in the Martha Novitiate. She also met

there life-long friends who became fellow Marthas!

After making profession and completing her studies, Sr. Stella began teaching in Cape Breton and her niche became older kids; she had a good rapport with the students who knew she was just, but firm. If there were any issues, she always talked things through, gave students a choice, making sure they understood the consequences. Very soon, she was asked to work as administrator in addition to teaching, and she was Vice Principal and Principal of many schools she worked at in Nova Scotia and Alberta. She was a good administrator because she understood teachers' needs in the classroom and was always able to listen to them with an open

mind. Upon retiring from teaching, she did 3 terms in CSM Leadership, was a treasurer and a local superior in some of the convents and in Martha Retreat Centre in Lethbridge. Throughout her career, she valued being frank, respectful towards others and, above all, open to people and ideas. She brought these qualities into her Inverness ministry.

Sr. Lucy and Sr. Stella live simply, with no frills, following Martha Values. They care for the environment, for each other and those in need, living Gospel Hospitality every day through their actions.

Farewell, Inverness!

Our love for all of you is best expressed in the words from St. Paul to the Philippians (3:1); "I thank my God each time I think of you. When I pray for you, I pray with love."

Thank you! God bless you all!

~Sr. Lucy MacNeil, fragment of the speech at the closing reception, Sept 18, 2022

