

By Cynthia Martin

## Sister Elizabeth Davis: Values-Based Leadership

You can be forgiven if you think there are a few lively women in healthcare with the name Elizabeth Davis. But they're likely all the same person – Sister Elizabeth Davis, a member of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, Newfoundland and Labrador – who's been a teacher, held leadership and governance positions, served on numerous boards, given hundreds of speeches and won many awards. With all of this, she's now a doctoral student in scripture at the Toronto School of Theology, University of Toronto.

Born in Fox Harbour, Newfoundland, she entered the congregation in 1966. After teaching high school (1969 to the early 1980s), she became Assistant Executive Director at St. Clare's Mercy Hospital in St. John's, Newfoundland, becoming Assistant Medical Director and then Executive Director both in 1986. In 1994 she was appointed President and CEO of the Health Corporation of St. John's until beginning her studies in 2001, when she won the *Alpha Sigma Nu* Entrance Scholarship, Regis College. She currently serves as Commissioner, Royal Commission on Renewing and Strengthening Newfoundland and Labrador's Place in Canada.

Sister Elizabeth serves on many boards and committees in the public sector, including the Rhodes Scholarship Selection Committee, the Medical Council of Canada and the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation. Two of the more recent courses she's taught – in more than 400 presentations, speeches and planning retreats – are *Value-Based Leadership Today* and *Perspectives on Ethical Leadership at Royal Roads University* in Victoria, British Columbia. She holds a BA and BEd from Memorial University, an MA (Theology) from the University of Notre Dame, and completed an MHSc in Administration at the University of Toronto in 1985, winning six major awards, scholarships and fellowships. In addition to other awards, Sister Elizabeth was given a Doctor of Laws honorary degree from Memorial University in 2002.

In this interview, Sister Elizabeth gives us her thoughts and personal insights on the ever-changing world of healthcare – and also speaks to us about the things that never change.

**You've had many roles – among others, teacher, hospital CEO and now commissioner; what is your favourite?**

My life has been blessed with opportunities to do different things, to go to new places, to see the world from different perspectives. Throughout all my different roles, however, the dominant thread has been teaching. Since I was three years



**SISTER ELIZABETH DAVIS**

old, I wanted to teach. Learning always fascinated me – as soon as I learned something, I wanted to share it with everyone. In teaching, I found there's wisdom in everyone. A teacher is privileged to draw forth that wisdom and give persons the joy of knowing they have such wisdom within. In my leadership roles, I've realized the greatest reward comes from helping people know how good they are.

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**Why did you move to healthcare administration?**

As a member of a religious community, I'm committed to ministry in that tradition. The Sisters of Mercy have provided ministry in both education and healthcare. Therefore, I've always tried to be involved wherever my personal gifts and ministry needs were best aligned. In my early adult life, that need was greater in teaching, so that's where I began my professional life. Later, when the need was greater in healthcare administration, I chose to change professions and enter healthcare. I'm privileged to have been part of two worlds that are incredibly rich in the persons who work in them and in the difference they make in the lives of people. In both worlds, I've met people who challenged, encouraged, taught, listened to and cared for me, and who never failed to impress me with their commitment and their energy. I have been given so much.



Sister Elizabeth Davis with winners of Bravo Awards at Health Care Corporation of St. John's

**How does your faith steer you, particularly when addressing governance issues and stewardship of an organization?**

Each of us sees life through a certain perspective and lives life within a specific world-view even if we're not always conscious of doing so or if we cannot articulate that world-view. My belief in God and my formation in the Roman Catholic Church have been gifts to enable me to shape my world-view. My faith gives me the impetus to endeavour to make a difference our world, to play even a small part in creating a world of justice and peace. It gives me the measure against which I judge my relationships, my respect for people and the earth, and my care for myself. Therefore, when I'm part of an organization entrusted by the community to provide service, I'm conscious that trust requires me to be a leader in finding ways to respond to community needs and be a just steward of resources in the organization.

**People say they're struck by your ability to bring issues down to the needs of individuals. Has this always been one of your personal operating guidelines?**

As humans, our lives are centered on relationships. I believe we can form community and shape a just and peaceful world only if we always remember the dignity of each person. In leadership positions, as we seek the best direction for our organizations, we have to focus on the greater good – the greater good for the community, the organization or society. Such a focus, however, can lead us to make decisions, which negatively affect individuals. Identifying values to guide the organization when such outcomes are possible and holding the leader and the organization accountable for living out those values are essential to maintain credibility and the trust of staff, clients and the broader community. Recent events on the global scene have reminded us that such beliefs are not idealistic and for dreamers only, but legitimate expectations our society has of its organizations.

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**Do you find people are increasingly searching for higher meaning and value in their work?**

People have always searched for this, consciously or subconsciously. Such a search is not a priority when we are concerned with finding enough money to support a family or become educated. However, once there's some security at a basic level, we can focus on higher meaning. As many of us reach that age when we have secure positions and children are raised, we have time to reflect on other matters and call others to do so. Finding ways of integrating these values in the workplace, as we do in our families and artistic expression, is one of the most enjoyable aspects of work today.

**Do you see basic aspects of professionalism missing? For example, nurses who expect night-time sleeping on shift or staff wearing ball caps at work – basic standards interpreted negatively by patients and families.**

Professionalism is the element that fosters the trust of the broader community and gives every healthcare profession its legitimacy. Without it, you cannot call a group a profession. Will there be individuals who fail to live up to the standards of the profession? Of course. The responsibility to hold the professional accountable lies with the professional, profession, workplace and community. I'm seeing increased acknowledgment of the need for accountability, to identify and make visible values and the inclusion of community representatives within accountability structures of professional groups. Such initiatives will ensure the trust the community places in professions and professionals will not be betrayed.

**Much of your work has centred on patient-focused care. What benefit is there in making caregivers have university degrees?**

I'm old enough to remember the debates about who is the centre of the healthcare system. It's clear the focus must be on both if the system is to be healthy, as an imbalance in either direction leaves the system weak and incomplete. The system exists for the health of citizens, but the workers bring life and energy. History has taught us that we neglect one or the other at our peril. Education is key to reshaping the system to be more responsive to the needs of people. Every worker – nurse or physician, housekeeper or technician, therapist or administrator – needs the depth of education to be a participating member of the healthcare team, competent in his or her own field and understanding of the roles of other members. Our failure to develop strong and integrated programs for both initial education and continuing education has prevented us from realizing the potential that exists when a group of workers sees themselves as a team, a community in which each one holds a valued place and carries out a crucial role.

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**One of your interests is how women are portrayed in the Bible. Do women get a raw deal in its interpretation?**

Neither in society nor in church have women been given the respect and value that is rightfully theirs. Historical records, sacred writings and the arts have all portrayed women in inappropriate ways. The Bible, which constitutes sacred writings of the Jewish and Christian traditions, reflects attitudes of the times in which it was written. What’s amazing about the Bible, however, is the number of women who are celebrated, whose experience is valued, who are seen as leaders in both the public and private domains. In the books of the Bible, female and male images are used to describe God. Moreover, the Bible challenges us to eradicate injustices wherever they are found, thus affording us the impetus and direction to address injustices faced by women, children, minority groups and all who are not members of whatever the dominant culture may be. In so doing, the Bible calls us to challenge interpretations which misuse sacred writings to support injustice and calls us to challenge its own language and imagery when they fail to be true to the spirit of justice and mercy.

**What is your work on the Royal Commission?**

Our commission is looking at strengthening Newfoundland and Labrador’s place in Canada, with a one-year time frame until June 2003. We’re speaking with people about our expectations when the province joined Confederation, our sense of place in this province, our sense of belonging and contributions in Canada, and the contributions Canada has made to our life. We’re also looking at ways we have not realized our expectations as Canadians, and about the kind of future we want. It’s a commission focused on remembering and knowing our past in order to understand our present and prepare for our future, identifying strengths and weaknesses to shape that future, and envisioning our future valued for the unique gifts we bring to our country. The commission will hold public hearings, attend roundtables, sponsor research and include communication through artistic expression as well as the spoken and written word.

**You participated in an archaeological dig in Israel – what did that teach you?**

It was an aspect of my study of the Bible, the specialty area I was pursuing in teaching. The two great lessons I learned were the imprint all communities leave on the physical environment and our need to remember that as we use the earth’s

resources, and the importance of exploring our community’s story to help guide us to a new place. The time I spent in northern Israel, learning about people who lived there more than 3,000 years ago, remains forever in my memory as a time of wonder, joy and incredible learning.

**You’ve given hundreds of talks on differing subjects – on what do you prefer to speak?**

The three subjects about which I love to share my thoughts with others are women in the Bible, values and leadership, and the special power of those over 50 years of age to make a difference.

**“It’s my strong belief that each one of us is called to leave this world a better place than we found it. It’s important that this call is lived out in our family, community and workplace.”**

**What books are you reading?**

Books permeate almost every aspect of my life. For study, I’m reading Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, and for the commission work, Peter Neary’s *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World, 1929–1949*. For inspiration, I’m reading David Whyte’s *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity*, and for fun Nancy Milford’s *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*. I also love murder stories from the Middle Ages and science fiction.

**Who would you most like to have around a dinner table?**

Apart from my family and my religious sisters who are always my favourite dinner companions, I would really like to go to a dinner party with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Stephen Hawking and the Dalai Lama.

**What do you do for fun?**

I like to explore worlds of nature and of ancient civilizations. While I was in Australia on business, I snorkelled on the Great Barrier Reef – it was magical with the incredible shapes and colours of fish and coral. When I visited our Sisters in Peru, I was privileged to visit the newly excavated tomb of the Moche warrior king at Sipan and hold the artefacts buried with him.



Sister Elizabeth Davis with first baby born at General Hospital, Health Care Corporation of St. John’s

[publisher's note]

When I finished my work in health administration, I took a three-weeks' vacation driving alone through northern Wales, England, Scotland and the Outer Hebrides finding and marvelling in the stone circles, standing stones and cromlechs.

Sharing the Disney and Star Wars movies with my young nieces and nephews was a special means of relaxation when I was busiest at work. I confess to being a Star Trek fan since the first series. I will be first to volunteer when a space program decides to experiment with the reactions of middle-aged nuns during space travel! I cannot think of anything more fun than finding the keys to worlds different from mine in both time and space.

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**Eco-theologians argue the damage humans are doing suggests we've lost an understanding of the earth, ourselves, and how humans play a part. Do you think disconnection, in many forms – absence of community, misuse of the earth's resources, war, disregard of other species – comes from a learned disrespect for our world?**

I was privileged to grow up in a small fishing community that lived in harmony with its environment. Today, I know the pain of a province that suffers the loss of its codfish and, with it, the loss of a whole way of life. Yes, I do believe disrespect for our world reflects a failure to see the integration of all creation and results in a loss of the sense of connection. We will not be whole until we know our place in this cosmos. We will not be healthy unless our earth is healthy. We can only be grateful that there are so many today who are reminding us of this reality and are holding us accountable for the tragedy we're calling on ourselves. I hope that we will have the wisdom to hear them and the courage to act.

**How important is it to engage in social justice? Is it incumbent on people to do what they can to preserve the world?**

It's my strong belief that each one of us is called to leave this world a better place than we found it. It's important that this call is lived out in our family, community and workplace. It must be reflected in our relationships to each other, to our God, to our cosmos and to ourselves. While one or the other place or relationship may take precedence at any point in our lives, we will find our true selves only when all are working in harmony. This means we need to take the time to reflect on our earth, to study, to listen to and learn from others, to trust our own experience and to celebrate the goodness with which our lives are blessed.

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