



SPIRITUAL MATTERS: Reverend May Laban holds a communion wafer in St Paul's Church in Durban.

PICTURE: ZANELE ZULU

# A woman of the cloth

**I**N A VOCATION dominated by men over centuries, it's unusual to see a woman not only in the pulpit, but occupying an executive position in the Anglican Church.

Reverend May Laban has broken through a previously male preserve by becoming the first female rector at St Paul's Anglican Church in Durban in 160 years and she has brought to the position a special combination of managerial excellence and gentle caring.

While most men in the church ministry have caring and compassionate qualities essential to the nature of their work, women seem to have a nurturing and mothering edge, says Laban.

As rector of St Paul's Church and archdeacon of Durban, Laban's caring qualities are exercised daily. She is all too aware of the desperate need for physical and spiritual nourishment of people in Durban's inner city and St Paul's has many programmes to meet those needs.

Besides its two Sunday morning and five weekday services, it also runs a soup kitchen, sponsored by outsiders and the congregation, run by volunteers, that feeds between 180 and 200 people, five days a week. The church also has a "Basket Sunday" when the congregation brings items

## In Women's Month, Lindsay Ord speaks to the first Anglican woman archdeacon in Durban, Reverend May Laban

for people in need. "We have an arrangement with the Central Methodist Church who provide shelter for many of the homeless people in Durban," says Laban.

The beauty of St Paul's, she says, is that it is always open for people to wander in and out and spend time in quietness or pray. While many churches remain locked in the daytime because of security concerns, Laban believes the church should be accessible at all times.

"We have a visitors' book where people can record their prayer requests," she says. "Every Friday morning we have a healing service during which we commit the names in the book for prayer."

The church's work extends beyond its Pine Street boundaries. "Our Diocesan Bishop Rubin Phillip, says our task is not within the four walls of the church but beyond its walls and he has worked

tirelessly in this regard," says Laban.

"An example of this is the part he played in preventing an arms shipment from China, bound for Zimbabwe, from being offloaded in Durban last year, and many other causes he has championed. We are proud that he is being honoured with the Brennin International Award for Justice in Germany in October."

So, how did Laban rise to the position of archdeacon? She was born in Durban and was schooled at Clareville Primary and Centenary High before training as a teacher at Springfield College of Education.

She taught for 22 years, all the while active in Christ Church, Overport, as a youth worker, lay preacher and Sunday school teacher. At that stage women could not be ordained in the Anglican Church, but in 1992, Synod approved the

ordination of women and Laban knew that full-time ministry was where she wanted to be.

She studied theology part-time and did a Bachelor of Arts Honours at the University of Durban Westville, followed by a diploma in theology and a Master's degree in theology at UKZN.

She became the first woman assistant priest in Pietermaritzburg, spending four years at the Cathedral of the Holy Nativity and as rector of St Paul's in Pietermaritzburg for 10 years.

She's also on the committee of the Missions to Seafarers and Kerr House, a shelter for abused women in Stamford Hill.

Her work is busy and demanding, but she still finds time for simple pleasures in life, like walking on the beach and reading. And she's a devoted aunt to her niece, Mary, whom she has mothered from the age of two.

She would love to see more women – and men – in the ministry. The Diocese of Natal will preach on vocation at the Sunday Services on September 20, followed by a meeting of those interested on September 26.

If you would like to help at the soup kitchen and provide for the poor, contact St Paul's Church at 031 305 4666.

## Thrills and trills in SA couture

World-renowned opera diva Renée Fleming performed in the Durban City Hall last night wearing gowns by a South African couturier.

**Diane de Beer** reports

ONE of the most celebrated classical singers of our time, soprano Renée Fleming is known for her fashion sense, wearing clothes by designers such as Dior, Karl Lagerfeld, Christian Lacroix, Vivien Westwood, Oscar de la Renta and Bill Blass.

But for her South African tour of Pretoria, Cape Town and Durban, she has chosen to wear gowns by South African designer Henry Schickerling, who now lives and works in New York.

Those who can remember the 1970s and early 1980s and were vaguely interested in local fashion will recognise the name.

Schickerling left for an international career in the mid-1980s.

For the past decade he has been establishing his own line, Tosca Couture, in the US.

A passionate opera follower, he can also be heard on local radio (RSG) on Sunday nights talking about opera and his operatic designs for another Metropolitan star, mezzo soprano Susan Graham.

For the local concerts, Schickerling has designed two spectacular gowns for Fleming, one that she will wear onstage at the start of her performance, and the other, after the interval. It's a coup for this fashion veteran.

He describes her as one of the best-dressed women in the US. He praises the diva as one of his easiest clients. "Because she's used to fitting costumes, she knows exactly what she wants and is easy to please," he says.

If your company is called Tosca Couture, how could Fleming resist?

**DIVA:** Soprano Renée Fleming in the Henry Schickerling creation that she wore on stage in the Durban City Hall last night.



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