

St Canice's, Westport, New Zealand *"Magic Moments"*



Little did I know when I wrote a song back in 1999 called "These Hands" that it would eventually be sung in Catholic Schools around Australia and New Zealand. As some of you would know it started out as "the Nothing Song" in response to a little boy called Ryan Evans, who, when asked what he wanted to sing said, "Nothing".

"These Hands" is easily my best known and most used song. It's what I call a "door-opener". While it's not one of my personal favourites I love it dearly simply because it is a song that children seem to hear once and are able to sing along almost instantly. On the basis of that song's appeal, children and teachers will then start to listen to some of my other songs- so it "opens the door" to my music.

In the early days of visiting schools I sometimes wondered how I would feel when I was singing "These Hands" for the 1000th (which I've now done) or 2000th time. I can safely say that I still love to sing it and what often makes singing it worthwhile is catching a child, often a six or seven year old, who is caught in the moment, singing and moving and praying all at once.

One such beautiful moment happened at St Canice's School in Westport, on the west coast of New Zealand's South Island. Throughout the day I'd been struck by the self-discipline of the children. Two days earlier I'd visited a school and worked with a hastily thrown together choir where there was a teacher supervising, but the group remained fairly unruly. To be honest, it was a disheartening experience.

The children at St Canice's, by contrast, seemed to need no-one. During our choir session there was a teacher assisting but she was able to enjoy the workshop as a spectator, so beautifully behaved were these children. And they loved to sing too which helped, and they sang exceptionally well, which was even better.

The day culminated with a beautiful concert in the church. Often at the end of a concert I'll play Tim Hart's "Walking Out the Door Song" but when I'm in a church I usually have the children walk out to a reprise of "These Hands", which is what I did on this occasion.

But for some reason the children and teachers were slow to leave. A mother who had been watching with two toddlers gently urged them to come out the front and help me with the actions, which they did. Then one or two of the younger children, only about three or four, just drifted out from their class and stood with us. Soon we were joined by others, who didn't come rushing out but just glanced at their teachers, and then gently joined us. As the song progressed, more and more joined us from all of the classes until by the end of the song about eighty percent of the children were gathered in song, prayer and movement around the altar.

What I remember most was the reaction of the principal and teachers who sat and smiled and nodded as the children gently emerged from their seats. They must have felt proud to know that they had created such an atmosphere of love and trust and self-discipline that such magic and prayerful moments were possible.