

## Obituary

### David Christopher Thorns, 1943–2020 MA, Litt.D, ONZM, FRSNZ



**O**n 30 December 2020, family, friends and colleagues gathered at the Christchurch North Methodist Church to farewell Emeritus Professor David Thorns and celebrate his life and achievements. David died after a long period of ill-health, in Christchurch on Christmas Day 2020, in the presence of family. He was 77. Family members spoke of him as a loving and supportive husband and father, and together, his four grandsons read the poem “His Journey’s Just Begun”. Long-term friends rejoiced at the fun that they had had with David and all their families, over many years and holidays. His close friend and fellow sociologist David Pearson, speaking eloquently on behalf of David’s colleagues, painted a picture of a man with an expansive intellect. He was a prolific author with a long list of internationally and locally published books, articles,

chapters and reports to his name. Much of his wide-ranging research on housing, social and economic inequality, environmental sustainability, urban and regional development and ageing remain highly relevant. Demography underpinned much of this work.

David was born on the 26 August 1943 in County Durham, England, the son of a Methodist minister. This meant a peripatetic childhood as his father's appointments changed every five years. He, along with his parents and elder brother, moved frequently throughout his childhood and teenage years. He attended high school first in Portsmouth and then in Chippenham.

David completed a BA (Hons) in economics and sociology at the University of Sheffield in 1964 and an MA in sociology at the University of Exeter in 1967. He was a research assistant at the University of Nottingham from 1964 to 1965 and then became a lecturer in sociology at the University of Exeter while he was completing his master's degree. He was later to be awarded a doctorate (LittD) by the University of Canterbury in 1982 in recognition of the quality of his scholarship.

David arrived in New Zealand in 1973 to take up a senior lectureship at the University of Auckland. At the end of 1976, he was appointed as senior lecturer in sociology at the University of Canterbury, where he was to spend the rest of his academic life. He was promoted to a reader in 1979, professor in 1995 and to emeritus professor at the time of his retirement.

David's life was shaped by his love of family, his strong Christian faith and his scholarship. He married Gloria Kathleen Corrigan in 1966 whom David often described as "the love of his life". After a long and loving marriage, Gloria died in 2018. They had two daughters, Karen and Joy, who each have two sons. David was an extremely proud father and grandfather and spoke about his family's achievements with great fondness and pride.

Faith was important to David and he followed in his father's footsteps. For fifty years he was a lay preacher in the Methodist

Church and both he and Gloria were involved in re-establishing the Methodist church at Harewood, in Christchurch, after the 2010–2011 earthquake sequence. The quakes also badly affected their own home in Parklands, and they struggled through the remediation challenges together. Characteristic of David was that he drew on these experiences, analysed and wrote about them in a way that generalised their key elements.

Reflecting on David's life and work, we remember him as the consummate intellectual, always reading, debating and writing, with an interest in the 'big picture'. While in disciplinary terms David could be categorised as an urban sociologist, in reality his interests went well beyond sociology, encompassing the allied disciplines of economics, geography, planning and population studies.

At the University of Canterbury, David was widely regarded as an excellent teacher, illustrating social theory through very practical, grounded examples. As a supervisor he was outstanding, always encouraging and supportive and engaged in his students' work. He had many administrative roles, including head of department from 1982 to 1990 and as a key member of a number of university committees. As a discipline leader, David established the Social Science Research Centre at the University in 2000. David was very keen on collaborative work. While he often wrote sole-authored work, as his career developed, he led or was an active member in a significant number of collaborative research programmes and policy-directed work. He liked working with others and sought out collaborators. The University acknowledged the quality of his research with the award of the University of Canterbury Research Medal in 2002.

Beyond the university, David made a great contribution to research development and leadership. There are too many examples to enumerate, but some do stand out: his role in the Centre for Housing Research Aotearoa New Zealand (CHRANZ), inaugural chair (1997–2000) of the Social Sciences Marsden Fund Panel (as well

as being a member of the Humanities panel), the first social sciences vice president of the Royal Society of New Zealand, and a key member of the Building Research Capability in the Social Sciences (BRCSS) when it was established in 2004. He was also active in UNESCO's Social Sciences Subcommittee from 1996 to 2008.

These local roles were matched with an extraordinary range of international activities. David was a member of the executive committee of the International Sociological Association's (ISA) Housing and Built Environment Research Committee from 1994 to 1998. He was active in the Australasian Housing and Urban Research Network, was the New Zealand representative on UNESCO's Habitat 2, participated in the United Nation's Habitat World Forum in 2004 and in 2006, and was appointed as a member and then vice president of the International Social Sciences Council. He was on the steering committee of the Asia Pacific Network for Housing Research and was closely allied with the Australian Housing and Urban Research Network.

David's career culminated in 1995 with the award of a prestigious fellowship of the Royal Society of New Zealand Te Apārangi, and in 2009, he became an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit. We remember David as a dear friend and colleague, strongly driven by a desire for a better and socially equal world. He was a quiet but determined man, with a warm sense of humour. He was a delight to work with and we miss him dearly.

Harvey C Perkins, Emeritus Professor, University of Auckland

Ann Dupuis, Associate Professor, Massey University (retired)