

Social Pioneers

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 7 October 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Elaine and John Telford

Pentecost 20B

**Job 1: 1; 2: 1-10; Contemporary Reading: *Social Pioneers*,
an excerpt from *Courage to Lead* by Brian Stanfield; 1 Corinthians 12: 12-19**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Gatherings" tab

JOHN

Elaine and I have been invited to share with you some of our experience in responding to the call of the gospel and to reflect on the response to that call which some people make.

By '*the call of the gospel*' I mean the call to love one another and to respond to the needs and injustices we see or encounter on our life's journey.

We are all familiar with the story of the 'Good Samaritan' – when we see someone in need do we '*pass by on the other side*' or do we figure out how we can help? And like all of you, I suspect, if we are honest with ourselves, we know there have been times when we have passed by on the other side. But there are many times when we have stopped and helped, or given our support to programs which are responding to the need.

The 'call of the gospel' comes in many forms:

- sometimes it is when we read or hear of the suffering of people such as the refugees held on Nauru or Manus Island, or of those held in detention centres in Australia, or of the homeless living on our streets of Sydney, or the survivors of the tsunami in Indonesia, or of the needs of families living in countries where there are virtually no health services – the list is long and seems to be growing every day.
- then at other times the call comes when we encounter situations 'face to face' and with our own eyes see the reality of the need. In that moment you are sometimes faced with a real-life choice – do I continue along the path I have been following or am I being called to take a different road?

The first time I remember facing just such a decision was during the first period of our married life in the 1960s when we were living at Bordertown and I was employed as a Farm Management Adviser by some of the farmers in the district and we had just started a family.

But the times they were a'changin'!

ELAINE

Many adults during the sixties had caught the vision of being actively engaged in social justice through the synergy of those times.

Australian Frontier, an offshoot of the Australian Council of Churches sponsored a wide range of community consultations to address community needs. They also invited progressive thinkers from overseas to visit Australia – one of these was Joseph Mathews from the Ecumenical Institute in Chicago.

Several clergy and laypeople attended some weekend courses he led, looking at the gospel as interpreted by some progressive theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann and Richard Niebuhr.

Following this, some of those who had attended began offering similar weekend seminars across the country.

John and I attended one of these weekends, which was prepared with intentionality and purposeful style. Three separate sessions included a lecture, followed by a study of 3 contemporary theologians, with another couple of sessions using art form conversations which focussed on the Guernica painting by Picasso and a modern movie called 'Requiem for a Heavyweight'.

This weekend was a momentous awakening of our spirit lives.

JOHN

Over the next couple of years we met regularly with others who had attended these seminars, continued studying some of the progressive theology texts and spent time figuring out how we might apply those ideas in our work in community.

Some of the members of this new 'spirit movement' decided to live together in a 'community house' in Paddington, as they continued teaching weekend seminars; and each summer would organise a Summer program over 2-3 weeks where people from across the country would come together and be inspired to continue their work back on their home territories.

They also responded to an invitation to send a team to work with the Aboriginal community of Mowanjum near Derby in W.A. which had been run as a Mission station for many years by the Presbyterian Board of Missions. That team included Ron and Pam Denham.

This team invited me to visit Mowanjum to suggest possible agricultural enterprises the community could pursue so I spent a few days there.

It was the first time I had ever been to an Aboriginal community because I had grown up in West Gippsland just east of Melbourne - and any Aboriginal people who had survived the invasion of their land there had been moved out of sight down to Lake Tyers. I had heard of the 'missions' run by various churches and had a read a little about the paternalistic style of management of some of them.

So when I visited Mowanjum I did not know what to expect. But it was refreshing to see the Ecumenical Institute team working alongside the Aboriginal people to help them regain their self-esteem and make their own decisions about how to practice their culture, rather than be told by the Presbyterian mission staff who had been there beforehand, that they could not have paintings of their creator being, the Wandjina, in the chapel.

They now proudly had images of the Wandjina alongside the Christian symbols.

I returned home to Bordertown to reflect on whether I would continue my career in agriculture or was I being called to join this group who were forging a new pathway in how non-Indigenous Australians could interact with Indigenous Australians.

ELAINE

The summer program in 1972 was very significant in the Australian Spirit Movement's story. This is where the excitement became a serious question of decision, which involved a BIG commitment. Australian people involved in the Spirit Movement were energetic and very receptive to these revolutionary plans for Australia. (We actually were part of that decision, but we realised what we were saying is too much.)

Although many of us had attended Religious Studies weekend courses we hadn't envisioned that some of us would need to be the ones to enable this 'wild revolution' to become a reality.

Hearing the compelling biblical reading with the words "Samuel, Samuel" and the scripture story was the call to service which included establishing those Community Houses across Australia. These words still ring clear.

JOHN

Having seen what was happening in Mowanjum I was ready to say "Yes" to the call but how would Elaine respond?

ELAINE

This has been the hardest decision I have ever made in my entire life. I thought of a proviso to give me more time to consider such a huge option. We had been trying to sell a small block of land for several months. It sold in 3 weeks!

I still needed time to think things through. It's the only time I've thought seriously about divorce, as I was the mother of three young children – between the years of 7 and 2 ½!

By the end of February our family of two adults with three children - Kathryn, Michelle and Amanda along with their favourite dolls and toys, drove from Bordertown to Adelaide in our car, with a friend's trailer carrying our personal possessions, which included a 20 cubic foot chest freezer filled with our clothes plus a lounge suite to Adelaide House for our Intern year.

JOHN

We then spent the next 16 years under assignment with the Order Ecumenical, 10 years in Australia followed by 5 years in South-East Asia and Africa – where the children were not with us.

Elaine has some vignettes from those years to share with you – they will give you some idea of the challenges we faced, but also the rich experience of living and working in different cultural environments.

ELAINE

These vignettes are some of my journal entries that I looked through in preparing this today, written at various times throughout the decades living in community as the Order Ecumenical with our public face being the Institute of Cultural Affairs.

1982 – Hong Kong: *“This is a significant day and a significant year. We’ve arrived in Hong Kong and our 10th year of living in community.*

In the beginning of this ‘revolution’ people were captivated by the need for the new within the Church. In 1972 the Global Order Council in Chicago had the theme of “The Turn to the World” which for some clergy was rather scary – having to embrace the real world beyond the church. It was like we were looking for the profound. We were part of those who could see the introversion of the historical church.

Many of us were captured by the new that we could see in the practical “laying down one’s life” - where is society now? One of our key symbols has been the wedge-blade, standing between the no-longer and the not yet - and forging a new path.

I was caught this week (in Hong Kong) with the image of what is the wedge we need to forge into history? This week I’ve been teaching at Sara Beatie College located in Wanchai. What is the new for the Language English Dept – what’s the new edge for HK, for Asia? What’s the new for the world?

Some things in Aboriginal Communities became very clear: that “our” grandiose ideas were sometimes the ones that failed. What’s the wedge in these times we need to forge into history? I’m glad my cage was rattled this week!

Now we move to Africa, the continent - October 1983. Now in Kapini, the Community Development Project 15 miles north of Lusaka, with a 2 km walk from the main road to the centre.

We, as the Order, are made up of diverse individuals. By providence I was born into a Christian family. I cannot change that. I was born into a nation less than 50% of the population of Zambia.

The first nine years of being part of this Order was spent in the same nation - Australia. That was a gift and is also who I am. For the past 2 years I have lived in Hong Kong which was about as different as Kapini. As Hong Kong was from Murrin Bridge. Everything is a contrast.

I exchanged my Murrin Bridge jeans for a business suit in Hong Kong. A dilly bag for a business satchel. No public signs in Hong Kong were in English

Those two years have now become part of who I am.

Here in Lusaka we are one team, with one focus, each member having the same stipend base, each person is unique with unrepeatable individual gifts to enrich the corporate body.

The Order is not a static form, but continually evolving and at the 1984 Order Council will begin putting form onto our pioneering edge in society for the future. This will only be possible by input from the 170 locations.

This year we will be about writing the story which will become the authentic one for the following year.

December 1983: an Extract from a letter to my brother (I found this a very good description of the work and of what we did in Zambia):

During this past month we have been engaged in a whole new phase of work in Zambia. Initiating work in a new Ward each month.

A Ward varies in size but is the smallest, formal government division, comprising anywhere between 50 – 100 villages.

We initially do a one-day planning meeting with cluster villages from across the whole ward. We then then invite representatives from these clusters to a week-long Village Leaders' Training Program here in Kapini. Following that we send one of our ICA teams to visit each cluster once a month for 2 days to help the village leaders evaluate the past month's achievements and to plan the next month's activities. The response to date from the villagers has been very encouraging.

This past week we had 16 leaders from these villages and the District Officer from the Dept of Social Development attend. He had his life changed when he saw how he could work with people as an alternative to the 'top-down' approach which most bureaucracy adopt.

December 1984: A year later, this is some of our notes from my journal:

It's raining in Kapini. It only rains for 4 months each year in this part of the world. The rain is so welcome, but:

- *The truck is bogged by the windmill.*
- *The 40 mattresses have not arrived for the Human Development Training School due to start later next week*
- *The borrowed car cannot go into reverse and there's a flat tyre*
- *The Stocking family couple are sick*
- *The gas bottle had run out so no dinner could be cooked for the 20 adults and 5 children tonight, because we'd forgotten to kick roll the gas bottle to the road (2 kms) to be carried on the Matatu truck for replacement in Lusaka.*
- *The Rentokill man brings a full cylinder out to us, along with 40kg sacks of red beans and rice. Plus Polenta for Nshima which is the African's staple food.*

JOHN

So, that gives you some idea of some of the challenges which you face when you're working in different locations. Then, in addition to encountering such challenges, one of the joys of living in Zambia was to experience their cultural rituals.

We were invited to an event where local villagers had completed the health workers course which receives their certificates. The ceremony began and soon a local member of parliament, Mavis Myundo, who was to present the certificates was introduced. She spoke for about minute – then stepped down from behind the microphone and began to dance. She was quickly joined by everyone else. Dancing went on for perhaps 5 minutes and then she went back to the mic and continued with the speech. This was common practice of events in Zambia, where people sing and dance a lot.

So, that's a sort of example of how you can get the feedback of the experience. The joy of working in these different places.

Now, a little bit of reflection. What does it take to step out into the unknown where there are no guarantees about how it is going to turn out? The willingness to risk failure is one of those.

Sometimes it takes a lot of courage to divert from the known or the comfortable – sometimes you may find yourself in life threatening situations. For example, when I was working for CARE Australia in the Middle East after the first Gulf War in 1992, we had staff on the ground in three locations in the Kurdish region of Northern Iraq, working with local people distributing food and kerosene. Each of the foreign staff had a price on their heads and they could not dine out at local restaurants for fear of being targeted.

But, being in such situations also calls for ingenuity and creativity – as Elaine has already mentioned and as the reading from Corinthians says we all have different gifts so when we work together, amazing things can happen – seemingly 'impossible' situations can be transformed.

It calls for us to have faith, hope and love - and a belief that such transformation is possible.

It means trusting in the Mystery, of God, tapping into the River of Consciousness, that river which carries us along through life and which keeps being expanded and enriched through many varied experiences. And being willing to climb the Mountain of Care.

Then we may experience the Sea of Tranquillity – not a sea where everything is calm but where you may experience tranquillity even though the next moment a wave may come crashing down on you. As written in the contemporary reading '*the peace of mind you get here is the peace that passes all rational understanding*'. It is a kind of a problem-less-ness life in the 'midst of trials'.

There is a kind of joy unspeakable – the joy of sticking your fist into the deeps of life.

ELAINE

We are very proud and grateful to our delightful young girls who are now competent and independent women:

Kathryn is the mother of Jess and Hamish, working in the education sector, teaching at a school for children with special needs. Michelle has her own successful Yoga Practice and Amanda is working in the business sector with interesting and varied projects.