

## **UNITINGCARE BURNSIDE FIFTEEN YEARS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE**

### **Rev. Harry Herbert**

I am very pleased to be here tonight and to celebrate 15 years of social justice work within the Children, Young People and Families service group of UnitingCare NSW.ACT, and specifically within UnitingCare Burnside. The establishment of this program was an initiative of the former CEO of Burnside, Rhonda Stien, and although Rhonda and I had our differences at the end of her time as CEO, I am more than happy to acknowledge her as the person who specifically established the social justice program. And, also, the selection of Claerwen Little as the first manager of the program was another of Rhonda's decision of which I thoroughly approved.

When the Uniting Church was established in 1977 it had a strong focus on social justice which reflected the history of its antecedent churches: Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational. In earlier generations in the United Kingdom it was sometimes referred to as the "non conformist conscience", [I like the 'nonconformist' bit, but the term has dropped out of use], because all three churches were products in one way or another of the Reformation and, apart from the Presbyterians in Scotland, were not established State churches and they had a strong understanding of the separation of church and state. Indeed, the Congregationalists were somewhat fanatical about that issue and when I was minister of the Congregational Church in Warrnambool, Victoria, I discovered that the early founders of that church had accepted a Government grant of land on which to build their first church and as a result, all the other Congregationalists in

Victoria had boycotted the opening ceremony, claiming that accepting anything from Government was a mistake. We have a more sophisticated understanding these days, but we still believe that the church has a strong role to speak to the community at large and to governments about important ethical and moral issues. Although I appreciate the efforts of the Rudd Government to remove the so called 'gag' clause in Federal contracts, it won't have any practical impact on us because we ignored it anyway.

IN 1977 at the inauguration of the Uniting Church, a Statement to the Nation was issued within which it is stated: "We pledge ourselves to seek the correction of injustices wherever they occur. ....We affirm the rights of all people to equal educational opportunities, adequate health care, freedom of speech..... We oppose all forms of discrimination which infringe basic human rights and freedoms". I note that this Statement, now some 30 years old, is increasingly being quoted in the Church as a continuing relevant statement of our witness to the community.

Where perhaps the Uniting Church differs from some others is our understanding of what constitutes ethical and moral. However, I wouldn't want to make an exclusive claim there. I notice that Pope Benedict, soon to arrive on our shores, recently said: "the Church is the advocate of justice and of the poor, precisely because she does not identify with politicians nor with partisan interests". We would concur with that. In the Uniting Church we take a social justice approach in the belief that taxation, the economy, support for low income and disadvantaged people, the environment, are all important ethical

and moral issues. And what could be a more important moral issue than the care of children within the community? And what we have to say there is not only to government but also our fellow members of the Australian community.

In UnitingCare NSW.ACT we continue to take human rights seriously. For instance, on a matter of topical interest, I have pointed out to the Minister at a recent meeting that we select our foster carers on a completely non-discriminatory basis, and I am pleased to say that our foster care program has an excellent record in terms of longevity of placements.

It is this broad understanding of social justice that makes UnitingCare and most of the Uniting Church different, and we are proud of that. We stand in the tradition of Isaiah and Ezekiel, those prophets of old, to condemn inequality in our community, and in the tradition of Jesus of Nazareth in reaching out to the people on the margins and the socially excluded. We have supported social inclusion long before Tony Blair and Kevin Rudd arrived on the scene, but we rejoice that our new national Government is giving focus to this important concept. In the New Testament the story is told of Bartimaeus, a blind beggar who is touched and healed by Jesus. I am indebted to Fr. Gerald Arbuckle in a little publication called "A Preferential Option for the Poor", published by Catholic Health Care, who points out that the first thing Jesus did for Bartimaeus was to listen to him. That is something we should all strive to do in our social justice work. In UnitingCare we do try to listen to our clients, our people. Blind people were stigmatised in Jesus's day and were told, as Bartimaeus was by Jesus' disciples, to keep quiet and to stay on the

side of the road. However, Jesus listens to Bartimaeus and heals him and takes him from the side of the road to be in the middle of the road and to follow him on the way.

Our work in social justice is not a development of a theoretical model, but a real living work that arises out of our daily experiences. How could we possibly hear what we hear and see what we see, and not want to change the world to be a better place? Of course that means that sometimes we are difficult, unrelenting, unreasonable and dogged, but it is in the cause of justice for our clients and in that cause we should be passionate and persistent. My favourite text from the New Testament goes under the heading of “the unjust judge”. Jesus tells the parable of a woman who is seeking justice from an unjust judge, and in the end because of her persistence, even he, despite being unjust, gives in to her. Jesus’ point is that if she could get justice from an unjust judge, how much more should we expect to have our pleas heard from a loving God. And, indeed, that is what keeps us going in this work because we know it is right and we know that it is God’s work.

May our work in this area continue to flourish and be a continuing adornment to the work of UnitingCare.

Thank you.