

The Voice

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Reflections on serving on the CMN Board

At the recent anniversary service, long-term Board members Michelle Ehlers and Barry Mitchell shared their reflections on their service to the Board. This is what they shared.

Michelle Ehlers

It has been almost 17 years since I met John Bottomley, as most of you probably are aware, following the death of my brother Ross. I was in a state of anguish, anger, dismay and desperation. After a series of events and circumstances that sometimes resembled mayhem, we ended up bringing the issue of grief and death in the workplace to the Urban Ministry Network's table.

During the years, through my association with UMN which is now Creative Ministries, I have been afforded personal growth opportunities I remain eternally grateful for. I have been able to sit at a Board table with some of the most interesting and gifted people for whom I have a great and deep respect, each and every one of those people, some who have moved on in their journeys and most who are still here.

It is interesting that this letter of St Paul to the Romans 12:1-2, 9-18 was selected today. The mayhem that Paul was addressing in this letter was really similar to the world as we knew it 17 years ago. In the immediate and personal mayhem that I needed to address, I think CMN provided me with many of the components that Paul speaks of. In the passion about workplace practices, I could work with others who were genuinely as passionate as me, it was about expressing the message with love, not hate and bitter vitriol. We became able to rejoice when others rejoiced, and to help others to be patient in their own suffering, as we had explored doing so in our own.

It is with great pride and joy that I look at what has been achieved over the years by our Board, and for me personally. It was founded on that very small glimmer of hope I had in the midst of mayhem all those years ago. It was always my belief that we could change things, and with our unyielding

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zeal and indeed ardent spirits we achieved that, and CMN will continue to do so in the future, hopefully based in the simple and straightforward messages from the great adherents such as St Paul.

It has been such an extraordinary experience for me, and a very special journey of time brought about only through the perseverance and patience of John Bottomley and the absolute harmony that we as a board have always had. From the crisis that was me all those years ago, I think the final statement Paul makes is relevant again, and that I can forge my way forward with a such a deeper understanding of myself and others, that I do not any longer become enraged, nor suffer from vindictive feelings. I do walk and live pretty peacefully amongst my fellow human beings.

With the successes and achievements of Work-related Grief Support, I have come to a decision that I can now move on to explore some other avenues of my life. With John Bottomley retiring, it seems that at the end of my term later this year is an appropriate time. Some new faces will also afford the new Director a fresh landscape upon which to build anew, with the zeal and ardency of spirit Paul so encouraged.

Barry Mitchell

In my 20's and 30's I recall putting a great deal of energy and time into my local Presbyterian congregations – serving on Boards, Sessions, and various related committees.

It was the practice in those days to always start a meeting with a prayer, and to finish with a benediction. But that was the only time there was any reference to God, or what we believed, or what we were called to do. The rest of the meeting was generally taken up with administrative decisions to do with building maintenance, church services, recruiting Sunday School teachers, and so on.

At every Board meeting there was an opportunity to talk about our faith, to reflect on scripture, and try to discern what we were being called to do.

There was no opportunity to reflect on scripture; no mention of a gospel of justice, healing and reconciliation. In fact, in those days it was rare to hear those words.

By the time I reached the age of 40, I realised that I was in danger of losing my faith if I kept continuing on this path. Personal challenges, new revelations, increased awareness, were all coming to me from ecumenical activities beyond the congregation, and I eventually cut my ties with the local congregation altogether.

Many years later I came across the Creative Ministries Network (or UMN as it was called then). I was invited on to a Board that did not conform to the old model. At every Board meeting there was an opportunity to talk about our faith, to reflect on scripture, and try to discern what we were being called to do. It was a welcome change.

I started to think about things in my life that I wanted to understand better, and I was encouraged to write about some of the events from a biblical perspective. Let me give you some examples:

In 2005 I reflected on a dramatic change in my relationship with my sister which came about following the death of my elder daughter, Karen, at the age of 31. It took me some time to realise how deeply my sister was affected by the death of her niece; when I started to tell her some of the stories we were being told, she responded very eagerly. Later, while reflecting on these changes in the light of Isaiah's description of a river flowing through the desert, I described our relationship as life, death, and creation coming together to create something new.

In 2005, while on holiday in WA, our car broke down on a quiet stretch of road between Broome and Cape Leveque. We were on Aboriginal land at the time, and were rescued by an Aboriginal man on his way to a funeral at Beagle Bay. The 20-minute encounter with this man was so profound that later, while reflecting on the experience, I likened it to a way of thinking about God –

where the visible world of our ordinary experience intersects with the sacred. We had been treated like honoured guests in a timeless land, and the sacred had become present to us in a very real way.

In 2006 I reflected on a long association I had with a man in Braybrook who had, and still has, a serious drug addiction. At one stage he ended up in prison for a period of 2 years, and I realised, with something of a shock, that I was the only person who could visit him as he served his time. He had no family, and most of his friends had criminal records, and were not therefore allowed in to the prison as visitors.

As I arranged to be placed on his visitors' list, I kept thinking of the many different times Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God, describing it as the here and now, and of Jesus' own interactions with people who had been marginalised. Subsequently I made many trips to Port Phillip Prison to keep in touch with my friend from Braybrook, and we continue to this day to catch up on a regular basis.

In 2009 my elderly aunt died at the age of 90. My sister and I had visited her just 5 days earlier in a nursing home, and spent a couple of hours with her talking about her early life. She was alert, but unable to respond. As we stood up to go, I leant over to kiss her goodbye, and she suddenly put her arm around my neck and hugged me. I wrote about this later, reflecting on the fact that she had no children, and on the words of the prophet Isaiah who said: "Your name will be remembered among my people longer than if you had sons and daughters. You will never be forgotten."

I guess it is the emphasis on the "priesthood of all believers" that explains my long association with CMN. There is a certain integrity about the Network which not only kept reminding me that I have a ministry to the world, but also provided me with the skills needed to carry it out. It's an action/reflection model which engages with the world, as well as pausing to consider the biblical

underpinnings of what we do. It's a very different model to the one I experienced in the local congregation so long ago.

I am grateful that the CMN Board did not conform to the world, but was prepared to transform it, and I know that I will take my experience of the last 15 years with me in all that I do in future.

Book review

The Power of Unreasonable People:
how Social Entrepreneurs Create Markets
that Change the World

by John Elkington and Pamela Hartigan.

Reviewed by John Phillips

Following some volunteer work in downtown Washington DC, Kyle Zimmer was broken hearted to discover that in the poorest African American and Latino communities children had no books to read. Finding initial funding from various sources Kyle began the 'First Book' company. He purchased selected classics and customised reprints in carton quantities on a non-returnable basis. The price per book averages \$US1.80, including shipping, and represents a 75-cent margin for First Book. Within two years over half a million books had been distributed to more than eight hundred community programs. Kyle says, "Publishers are happy not to have return books, but the real impact is in the hearts and minds of children."

Andrea and Barry Coleman, after a life changing experience in Africa, woke up to the fact that while it takes only a few hours to reach cities around the world by plane, it can take days and many hardships to reach the more rural areas of developing countries. As the Colemans had met through their mutual love of motorcycle racing, the tools that were most readily in their hands were motorcycles. So, they started raising funds for 'Save the Children' and began a vehicle management program in the country of Lesotho. In 1996 they launched 'Riders for Health' and now have nine hundred bikes reaching eleven million people with regular, reliable health care, defying the unforgiving terrain of rural Africa.

The Aravind Eye Care System offers an intriguing hybrid model of doing business that has even proved viable in the United States. Dr. Venkat and his team, based in India, turned an eleven bed eye clinic into one of the largest and most productive eye care facilities in the world. Taking its services to the doorstep of rural India, the Aravind Eye Care System has become self-sustaining, treating over two million patients per year for free or with a steep subsidy, while still managing to turn a profit that it reinvests in growing and upgrading the enterprise. Like his hero Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Venkat refused to accept that the future would be a straight line extension of current reality.

These are only some of the stories behind the work of remarkable and courageous people we have come to speak of as social entrepreneurs. They undertake projects that appear impossible out of a growing sense of frustration and dissatisfaction with established business practices that serve the few at the cost of the many. They are convinced that our current system's days are numbered and their projects are a glimpse of the future. One can only hope and pray this is true! By creating new models of business, social entrepreneurs are also tapping into new markets that our current business practices choose to ignore.

While there are many hybrid models of social enterprise, it is true to say that all embrace a code of practice that is very different to the spirit of practice we have come to know and perhaps expect.

The creed of social entrepreneurs reads something like this:

- The focus/goal of business is to meet a social need.
- No one is to be exploited in the process (including animal life and the environment).
- Employees must be satisfied with a modest liveable salary.
- No hierarchical structures, privileges, or bonuses.
- Leadership/management is mutual with shared responsibility.
- All profit is ploughed back into the project.

For obvious reasons social entrepreneurs have come to be labelled 'Unreasonable People.' I am reminded of how Jesus of Nazareth was seen as unreasonable and dangerous by those who

wielded power, which eventually would cost him his life. There are already many hurdles faced by this emerging group of movers and shakers, yet one senses they will not be easily deterred. As I read this book I continually heard resounding echoes of Jesus in the synagogue, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to heal the sick, to liberate the oppressed, to give sight to the blind, and proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

A most inspiring, disturbing, and soul-stirring read, and highly recommended for all who care about their neighbours near and far, and the future of our children's children.

Film Review

The Other Son

By Margaret Neith

"The Other Son", directed by Lorraine Levy, tells the story of two teenaged boys – one Palestinian, one Jewish – who were accidentally swapped at birth. The truth doesn't come out until one of the boys takes a blood test as he is about to enter the Israeli army.

This is a story about family and identity. It is about how mothers and fathers cope very differently with the news that the son they have loved for eighteen years is not "theirs" and that another set of parents has raised "their" child in an antithetical culture. The film depicts the struggle of these parents to come to terms with this shocking news, and to try to communicate their grief and to understand what it may mean for their future family relationships.

Meanwhile, the two sons meet and, despite their personality and cultural differences, form a surprising friendship.

One of the saddest moments of the film is the response of the Rabbi to the troubled son when the son learns – to his grief and dismay – that he is not "really" Jewish after all. The Rabbi's response may have been technically

correct according to Jewish law, but I felt myself asking "where is your heart?"

This is a dramatic and sensitive movie – a story of heart and family in the context of two war-torn nations. It is the story of how people may come to see each other as individuals and to experience feelings of shared humanity which can – perhaps – transcend historic and cultural barriers.

Caring for the spirit of working people

Creative Ministries Network has appointed Rev Richard Arnold to pilot a program to care for the spirit of working people.

Announcing the appointment, CMN Director John Bottomley said, "The demands of work today place an increasing strain on the spirit of many working people. Longer work hours, job insecurity, bullying and meaningless tasks can all undermine their personal worth and identity. At the same time, work is an opportunity for many people to live out their values and calling. We see value in supporting working people to discern the movement of the life-spirit in their lives, whatever their circumstances."

Spiritual Companionship for Working People is a pilot program that recognizes all people may live out of a spiritual reality as they develop relationships with the mystery of life and the realities encountered on life's journey.

Richard Arnold explained that his role in the program is to "guide" a participant's journey in an intentional relationship as companions. For the first year of the pilot program, interested people may participate at no cost.

Richard said, "six participants can be involved. Each person meets individually with me for one hour each month. Participants may be church members or interested people in any form of paid employment. As long as you are interested in sharing in the "stuff of life", all matters of life can be shared, including family issues, crises of faith, the search for meaning and vocation, and workplace issues."

If you would like to find out more about joining

this free pilot program contact Richard Arnold on 9386 0292 or email arnclan2@bigpond.net.au. This innovative program is designed to create a safe space in which participants can become open to the whole of life, and feel supported and held in both the challenges and joys of everyday life.

Mental Health Initiatives for UCA ministers

A confidential support network has been started by UCA ministers who themselves suffered and/or continue to suffer from mental illnesses. The support network is being developed by the Creative Ministries Network to strengthen collegiality among ministers concerned to enhance their mental health.

CMN Director John Bottomley said the initiative flowed from a series of conversations with ministers after the release of the Network's research into mental health ministries. "Their experience of mental illness gives these ministers an 'inside' understanding", he said.

But not all ministers with a mental illness have found the church is a 'safe place' in which emotions can be explored and recovery can occur. The support network's coordinators aim to provide a safe place for ministers to talk their story, where they will be respected, affirmed for what they say, and their story treated in confidence.

Mental illness has been recognised as a growing social concern for some years. Based on the 2007 – 2008 Australian National Health Survey, 11% of respondents had a long-term mental or behavioural problem which could be identified by a medical professional (Australian Bureau of Statistics 4364.0 - National Health Survey: Summary of Results, 2007-2008). But the church has been slow to respond to the prevalence of mental illness amongst its clergy.

Mr. Bottomley said, "For those ministers who suffer depression or other mental illnesses there is a need for the church to understand their challenges, medication, and most importantly their own personal needs and

wants. There is also a need for greater understanding of how mental illness impinges on ministers' personal lives, and how people close to them are affected. We also believe the network can support ministers who 'come out' to others to establish empathy with others with a mental illness as a 'wounded healer'."

Ministers interested to find out more about the support network can contact John Bottomley on 9827 8322 or john.bottomley@cmn.unitingcare.org.au. "One of the support network coordinators will then follow up those interested to discuss how to share experiences and support each other in ministry," Mr. Bottomley said.

Life after death: a reflection on John 20:19-31

Recently John Bottomley was guest preacher at Scoresby Uniting Church for the dedication of the congregation's new Memorial Book. The occasion prompted this reflection on an Easter account in John's gospel.

Today we will dedicate a Memorial Book as part of the caring ministry of this church. The Memorial Book will be a place to record the names of loved-ones who have died, and who continue to hold a special place in our hearts.

Death, fear and loss

When I first met Stella, the place two of her children held in her heart was full of both love and anguish. Her 16-year old daughter had committed suicide, apparently becoming depressed and unable to cope with being taunted at school about her older brother's slide into mental illness and dependence on marijuana. Then Stella's son Michael, perhaps burdened by his younger sister's suicide, also committed suicide. Stella was

engulfed in a deep darkness, barely able to function. Life had no sense of direction or purpose. Any faith she had was gone. She felt dead - emotionally, physically, spiritually.

John's gospel records that 'In the evening of that same day, the first day of the week (the same day Mary had earlier reported seeing the resurrected Christ), the doors were closed in the room where the disciples were for fear of the Jews.' (20¹⁹) The taste of fear paralysed the disciples. They were afraid of life itself, and their world had closed in around them. So they locked their doors against a hostile and threatening world. This is the painful reality of what a human response to traumatic death feels like and looks like.

Like Stella, the disciples were desolate; beyond comfort, beyond hope, cut off from the one who had been their life. Their connection with Jesus had been violently ripped away from them with his crucifixion. In like manner, Stella was bereft. There was nothing that connected her to her loved-ones - nothing. Like the disciples behind closed doors, all was fear and death and loss.

Sheila
A video exhibition by CMN Art Studio teacher, Jessica Kritzer.

JESSICA KRITZER
Sheila





Image: Sheila, 2012, photographic still

April 11 - May 12
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The power of a true word

Sometime after her son Michael's death, Stella contacted our agency, the Creative Ministries Network. The coordinator of our work-related grief support program, Bette, agreed to visit Stella. Bette listened to Stella's account of her two children's deaths. As an apprentice chef, Michael was bullied at work, and the stress put him on WorkCover. From there, Michael's world disintegrated, until he could no longer bear to live. And his mother blamed herself for her son's death. She felt a failure as a mother, worthless as a person.

The suicide of two of her children cloaked Stella in the heavy burden of guilt. Our support worker responded to Stella's grief and guilt with two comments. First, Bette told Stella that Michael's death was a work-related death, and pointed out that Michael's employer had failed to keep Michael safe in a 'macho' abusive work culture. Second, Bette promised Stella that she would not promise her anything that she didn't know that she could provide. First, Bette spoke a word to address Stella's overwhelming guilt. 'Michael's death is not your fault.' Second, there was a word that promised Stella a measure of trust in what seemed at that time like an untrustworthy world. 'I will always keep my word to you.'

John tells us that Jesus entered the closed world of the disciples' grief and guilt and fear, and spoke a word to this group that had failed him, this group that betrayed him unto death. 'Peace be with you.' (v9) Jesus speaks a word to the fearful spirit that had ruled the disciples' heart since his crucifixion - 'Peace be with you.' Jesus words convey a message of acceptance and love to these people who had abandoned him - 'Peace be with you'. Jesus says in effect, 'My death is not your fault. And I will always love you as you are.' The ministry of grief support for deeply grieving people needs to speak such words of acceptance and love that have the power to calm fear and renew trust.

Grace: the space where healing takes place

Remarkably, Jesus then speaks a second time to this fear-filled group that had failed him utterly. 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' (V.21). How could Jesus even think these people could do God's work? How is it possible for those who have

made such a mess of their lives to now be the bearers of God's good news of peace to a violent and unjust world?

Some time after becoming a client of our grief -support program, Stella joined our agency's volunteer program. She became a volunteer, offering support to other people bereaved by work-related suicide. Then Bette organised a weekend for five women who had all suffered the work-related suicide of a loved-one. Over two days, the women shared their stories of life and death, of love and pain. For perhaps the first time, they knew the heavy burden of their pain-filled feelings had been heard and accepted .

They didn't have to justify or explain themselves to each other. They began to laugh at the depth of common insights they shared. And they knew that something precious had been renewed in their hearts. They knew they could live more fully. They knew their lives held something painful but precious they could share with each other, and then with others.

Grace: the solidarity of shared wounds

Before Jesus sent out his disciples, John tells us the resurrected Christ "showed them his hands and his sides". (v20) But what is he showing them here? Our scientific minds keep reading this passage as proof or evidence of Jesus' resurrection. Perhaps! The deeper truth is that Christ is showing them he is in solidarity with them. The shattered disciples are invited to look at the signs of Jesus' shattered or broken body.

Like the meeting between the women who shared the trauma of work-related suicide, we are being told that it is the crucified Jesus who is now mysteriously present in the very midst of a group of people who have also suffered violence and grief. Jesus is showing them he is one with them. This is a support group meeting for people who have lived through violence and trauma and death. And their sharing, their solidarity, is born of God's love, God's life-giving spirit. So Jesus breathes on them and then speaks again - 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.' (v23)

This is the breath of God's love and his resurrected life that Jesus breathes on his followers. Ten years after her children's death, Stella led 500 people two weekends ago on a Suicide Prevention walk through the CBD of a Victorian regional city. Stella has a deep and energising commitment to break the silence around suicide, to encourage people to be free of the guilt and shame that too often burden the lives of those bereaved by suicide.

This is the forgiveness Christ desires for you when you are burdened by grief, and embittered by death. Your memorial book invites people to remember their loved-ones free of all shame and guilt, to remember them with love that is forgiveness; and to know their spirit in your heart is a gift of the Holy Spirit for transformed life.

Seeing the One who draws life out of chaos and death

John may be concerned his readers haven't fully grasped all this, so finally we encounter the story of Thomas. Once again, we have too often read this account through the tiresome debate of the modern era, as if John was concerned about the modern conflict between science and faith. But Thomas is not doubting the evidence of Christ's resurrection. Thomas is not the 'doubting Thomas' those who worship scientific facts would like. In fact, Thomas asks for nothing more than what Christ shared with the other disciples a week earlier. Thomas had effectively missed the support group meeting the previous week, and simply wanted to be brought into the loop - to share what the others had shared.

So what did Thomas really see? Thomas saw that he was included in God's new community, despite his betrayal of Jesus, and despite missing the gathering the week before. And Thomas' inclusion in the new community around the crucified and resurrected Christ, this acceptance of Thomas in spite of all his failures, is nothing short of the miraculous in-breaking of the presence of God.

This is a far more profound truth than facts could ever measure. This is a God whose forgiving love has the power to draw new life

out of chaos, to draw community and love from the abyss of despair and death. No wonder Thomas exclaims- "my Lord and my God!" .

A young woman rushed up and grabbed Stella during the recent Suicide Prevention walk. The young woman knew Stella's daughter through their work, so she knew Stella's story. 'You have to come and talk with my mum', she said. The woman pointed out a hunched-over figure with dark glasses trying to look inconspicuous. As the two women talked, it was as if Stella was hearing her own story told back to her. The woman had two children who had committed suicide 20 years ago, and she had never spoken of it to anyone outside her inner family circle. Such was the burden of her shame - carried in bitter isolation for 20 long years.

So just as Thomas checked the resurrected Jesus' hands and side to know his suffering, the woman checked her 20 years old story with Stella's. Everything she had been through Stella could affirm. They had a shared story, this woman and Stella, this Thomas and Jesus. And in this bond of shared grief and trauma, of love and trust was renewing, life-giving, transforming.

This is the gift of resurrection life we celebrate each Easter. Today, may you receive the blessing of God's life-giving grace that has the faith to see in the deep darkness of death, and guilt, and shame, the power of God's love to bring life out of death. May your memorial book and your support ministry be a blessing for all those burdened by death.

May this congregation be a blessing to all who are lost in their grief, a community of the crucified and resurrected Christ that renews heavy hearts with Christ's peace and forgiveness.

Receive in your hearts the promise of John's gospel, that through your trust in God's goodness, "you may have life in Christ's name" (v.31).

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