

IN MY LIFE WORKSHOP
Thursday 14th September 2006
University of New South Wales

OPENING ADDRESS

I am very pleased to be here to day and to welcome you all to this workshop. My connections with this book are various. Sandra Black who project managed the book is now the Communication Manager for UnitingCare NSW.ACT. When the book was being produced, she was working at UnitingCare Burnside which is one of the service groups of UnitingCare NSW.ACT. Also, she was assisted by Claerwen Little, another staff member of UnitingCare Burnside whom I have known for many years. Meriel Schultz, who is from LMS Consulting, worked for UnitingCare Australia, in the Canberra office, for many years and our paths often crossed. And, finally, Tony Trimmingham and I have come to know each other through the various struggles that we have been involved in surrounding the establishment and continuation of the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre in Kings Cross.

Prior to the Drug Summit in 1999, I had only a marginal contact with issues relating to drug use. UnitingCare was not operating any programs in that area, and my only contact was through Rev. Ray Richmond, the Uniting Church minister at the Wayside Chapel. You will remember that prior to the Drug Summit, Ray and a group of supporters had been keen to get the issue of an injecting centre on the agenda of the Drug Summit. The issue had been raised in the report of the Royal Commissioner into Police Corruption when the Commissioner, Justice James Wood had recommended one, but a majority of members on a Parliamentary Committee had voted against it.

Then came the notorious T room at the Wayside Chapel when a makeshift injecting centre was established amidst considerable media attention and closed by the police. At the time the UnitingCare Board encouraged me to get involved in the issue and support what Ray Richmond was doing. The T Room achieved the purpose of getting the issue on the Drug Summit agenda, and the Summit endorsed a proposal to recommend that the Government establish one centre as a trial. The Government accepted the recommendation and announced that it would be operated by the Sisters of Charity. When, in November 1999, the Vatican over-ruled that, UnitingCare stepped into the breach, and thus began my education about these issues.

I soon found out that a lot of people had very negative views on drug users. In our public meetings it was nothing for people to speak of drug users in the worst possible language as if they were not human at all. It often had to be pointed out that all drug users were somebody's child, and they were all members of a human family. Some letters I received appalled me. One man suggested we should slit their throats just the same as his father had done when his sheep ate the wrong sort of pasture. But that wasn't the whole picture. Others did appreciate the complexity of the lives of drug users, and understood their predicament. Over the years some of them have written letters which have come to me through the staff of the Injecting Centre and many have told stories of how they have become drug free because of the help and encouragement of the Centre staff. However, it would be wrong to romanticise drug users whose addiction leads them to be single minded about obtaining drugs

whatever the cost to themselves and others and whose addiction leads to a self centredness that is not very attractive.

At our recent 5th Anniversary symposium of the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre, our counselling manager, Jake Rance, told the story of a drug user whose mother had driven him to Kings Cross to buy drugs because there was no turning him away and she wanted him to use them at the Centre. For various reasons he did overdose and his mother was called in to the Centre, his father later arrived, and our Medical Director Dr. Ingrid van Beek, commented that in that scene all the complexity, tragedy, ethical dilemma and pathos was evident.

The stories in “In My Life” are very absorbing. They certainly tell of complexity as well as frustration, anger, and despair. But there is hope in some of them also. And many of them are unfinished stories.

Part of my education on these issues was to find how much ideology there is surrounding illicit drug use. Harm reduction, which is what the MSIC is about and also needle/syringe programs are about, is unacceptable to some people because they believe that there is a simple zero tolerance approach to drugs and that it will be successful. They also cannot see that you can be against drug use, but at the same time support harm reduction programs. So, the people at Drug Free Australia for example, buoyed up with their Federal Government funding, spend all of their time attacking harm reduction, under the false delusion that this will lead to a drug free Australia. They are fundamentalists and ideologues, and we have too many of them in our world.

In Christian theology we often speak about contextual theology. It refers to the process of shaping your beliefs by the environment around you, listening to people's stories in order to discern the will of God. This book does a wonderful job of telling the stories of the people and I hope they will influence the way we deal with these issues in our society.

I look forward to working with you today on these issues and it gives me great pleasure in opening the in my life workshop.

Reverend Harry Herbert
Executive Director
UnitingCare NSW.ACT