



## REX GRAHAM INDUCTION

08/02/09

I want to use this induction service for Rev. Rex Graham as an opportunity to speak about the role of UnitingCare in regard to social justice. Rex is tonight being inducted as the Social Justice consultant in UnitingCare NSW.ACT. That doesn't mean that Rex is the only person in UnitingCare who works on social justice, nor does it mean that the only social justice that happens in the Uniting Church is done by UnitingCare. But, among the duties and responsibilities given to UnitingCare by the Synod is the work of social justice advocacy. There are 7 clauses of the purposes of UnitingCare NSW.ACT in the by laws which refer to this work, the first of which is "researching important issues in society, especially as they relate to peace, justice and the common good" another is "engaging in the political processes of the nation on behalf of the Church and seeking to influence change and reform, especially on behalf of disadvantaged people". Along with chaplaincy and the provision of community services provision, social justice advocacy is the third main plank of the work of UnitingCare, and this work is done on behalf of the Synod and the people of the Uniting church in NSW. Our role in social justice should be one of leadership, encouragement, and, sometimes, challenge to the Church. As Jesus' parable of the woman and the unjust judge [S. Luke 18:1-8] tells us, even the unjust will give you what you want to shut you up. So, the work of social justice undertaken by UnitingCare, sometimes has to be directed within the Church, as well as to governments, institutions, and the community. And all of them will to some measure need the same sort of harassment that the widow applied to the unjust judge. Indeed, I have found that while demanding justice from governments is fairly acceptable in the church, demanding justice within the Church itself can be much more problematic.

When I took up my current position in 1986, and it was then called General Secretary of the Board for Social Responsibility, I had come from Melbourne where I had greatly admired the Brotherhood of St. Laurence as a Church organisation which combined community service delivery, research, and advocacy in a particularly effective way. Despite what happened subsequently to Archbishop Peter Hollingworth, his tenure as head of the Brotherhood was very impressive for its social justice advocacy. When I had my one hour hand-over from my predecessor, Rev. Gordon Trickett, the main advice he gave me was to urge on me the importance of keeping community service delivery and social justice advocacy together. There are still people in the Uniting Church who don't agree with that. Efforts on my part some years ago to convince the National Assembly to combine UnitingCare Australia and Uniting Justice came to grief because of them. The NSW Synod was the only Synod in the Uniting Church where those two components have always been linked and it is our strength. The opponents argue that social welfare delivery compromises you and that you can only be true exponents of social justice if you are unfettered from the role of social service provision. I have never

agreed with that. In UnitingCare NSW.ACT our social justice advocacy is credible, realistic, and emerges out of our daily contact with people in need. For example, when we said that Work Choices was unfair we did it from the credibility of an organisation that employs nearly 7000 people and provides services to low income families. And that is true on most issues. So, after all these years, I think we have achieved my original vision of creating an organisation that had what I saw in the Brotherhood of St. Laurence when I lived in Melbourne in the early 1980's: research, advocacy, grounded services, as well as adventure and courage. Our decision in 1999 to establish the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre made that pretty clear both to the public and the church constituency.

So, Rex joins an organisation that is committed to social justice. No doubt there are some failings he can correct and some new ideas that can be implemented, but he joins an organisation that has no reservations about the role of social justice advocacy, in word and deed. That hasn't always been the case. In the 1980's it was an uphill battle with the most of the then Boards of Aged Care to get them to accept any commitment to the less well off. I vividly recall the annual meeting of what was then the Synod Aged Care Agency, when one Aged Care Board Chairperson demanded to know "who started the idea that the Church has to look after the poor". I was pleased to give him the answer. It is not a pleasant memory to recall that it was the Hawke Labor Government which forced a change when they tied grants of money to aged care hostels to acceptance of a certain percentage of what were called "financially disadvantaged persons". One notorious aged care board refused to accept the money because they were opposed to the conditions about who they should admit. Happily the new structure of UnitingCare, adopted by the Church in 2003, has changed all of that.

It can seem as though the argument about social justice has been won in the Church, but we need to continue to remind ourselves and other people that it is a core Christian value. Although the much beloved Basis of Union makes no reference to social justice, the Constitution states that the purposes of the Church include "to assist in human development and toward the improvement of human relationships, and to meet human need through charitable and other services". But, to make our point even clearer, we only need to look at scripture, where the work of the prophets and the teachings and ministry of Jesus leave us in no doubt that compassion and care for others, together with a passionate denunciation of unfairness and injustice, are the hallmarks of the Christian tradition. Nevertheless, in Christian history there have been attempts to divert the church into its own religious space. Philip Wogaman, in his book on Christian Ethics, refers to the struggle with the Gnostics in the early Church, and how with Marcion and others there were attempts to make a disconnect between the Christian faith and the practical affairs of the world. Wogaman points out that had the Gnostic view prevailed, "political questions, preoccupied as they generally are with the distribution of resources, protection of property and the regulation of the material circumstances of the society, would lose moral relevance".

But, despite the rejection of Gnosticism, the later history of the church shows that when the Church became politically powerful itself and there was a lack of distinction between church and state, there were problems. When the church tried to turn politics to its own advantage it became corrupt itself. And in the 2000 year history of the church there is much to be ashamed of when the Church and politics became wrongly intertwined. It is one thing to argue that the Church must engage in politics, it is another to understand how it ought to be done. The German Christian movement of the 1930's, which supported Adolf Hitler and his National Socialists, and which virtually took over the whole of the Church in Germany, with the notable exception of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his Confessing Church, is a constant reminder of the dangers of the wrong sort of political involvement. The best way to avoid this is probably to adopt the simple rule that if the Church is pursuing its own interests or advancing popular prejudice, it is getting into trouble, whereas if it is championing the rights of the marginalised and the poor, it is on the right track.

The role of the Church in social justice and politics must be centred on moral and ethical judgements. When I use the word "moral", I don't mean campaigning about topless sunbathing on beaches, but "moral" in its proper sense. How our society and the world treats the poor and disadvantaged is a moral issue. As also is the way we treat people with disabilities, people who are sick, our elderly, the homeless, our children, and, indeed, the people we have imprisoned for committing crimes. And, one way in which the church can play a moral role here is to look at these issues from a human rights perspective. When, as a nation, we adopt legislation to outlaw discrimination on the grounds of race, but we then suspend the operations of the Racial Anti-Discrimination Act on pragmatic grounds, there is a moral issue. In a recent article in the Guardian Weekly Jonathan Freedland reported that the Armed Services Committee of the US Senate had issued a bi-partisan report which stated that the abuses and horrors of the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq could not be put down to "a few bad apples", but in forensic detail it traced these horrible abuses to the decision on February 7<sup>th</sup> 2002 by President Bush that Article 3 of the Geneva Convention on War "did not apply to Al-Quaida or Taliban detainees". We should always be wary of the "ends justify the means" argument and it is encouraging that President Obama has already taken steps to deal with those issues in the US. Australia's treatment of asylum seekers and refugees was also a moral issue based on human rights, and the Churches of Australia were in the forefront of those who condemned the policies of the Government at the time, especially in regard to the detention of children.

There will always be those who argue that the Church, or UnitingCare doesn't know enough about issues in order to take up a campaign or make statements on complex matters. However, while a general understanding of the issues is important, you don't have to be an expert in the tax system, for instance, to know whether a new tax policy is unfair to low income people. You don't need to be an expert in international law to know that there was something suspect in Phillip Ruddock's continual use of the term "unlawful" when he referred to asylum seekers, or when Australia took steps to declare

that certain outlying parts of Australia were no longer part of Australia. There are, of course, some issues where UnitingCare is as expert as an organisation can be. For example, child protection, housing policy, disability services, aged care, mental health. But, when you adopt the moral perspective, UnitingCare doesn't need to limit itself to those issues but can turn to other important issues where a moral perspective is required.

The task that Rex is undertaking can be as long as a piece of string. The Board of UnitingCare, and staff of Executive, however, believes that to be most effective we need to concentrate on a few selected issues. And, of course, Rex doesn't have to achieve this task single handed, and there are many other people in UnitingCare to assist him in carrying out the task of social justice advocacy on behalf of the Synod.

When asked to select a Bible reading for this service, I chose the parable of the woman and the unjust judge. While Jesus told the parable in order to emphasise the unlimited nature of the love of God, as always he used everyday examples. In this parable we know what he is saying when he says that sometimes even the unjust can afford us with justice, if we but persist. Perhaps, even, make a nuisance of ourselves. The work of social justice advocacy certainly needs that sort of persistence and that sort of determination. Entrenched injustice isn't overcome with one letter, one march, one weekend demonstration, or one Synod resolution. In the greatest moral challenge that faces us, the preservation of the planet, it is an unending struggle. But when you have made your decision on proper moral grounds, there can be no turning back.

On behalf of the Board and staff of UnitingCare NSW.ACT I welcome Rev. Rex Graham to this role of social justice consultant, and we all wish him well as he sets out on his new ministry.