



The ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF MELBOURNE The Social Responsibilities Committee December Newsletter 2013

The SRC Website:

www.melbourne.anglican.com.au/src

PAUL MCDONALD ON FAMILIES TODAY

'OUT OF MY DEPTH' - ROB FERGUSON IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE MINISTRY

It's chapel time, and I'm at the door to the prison unit where the prisoners needing psychiatric care are housed. I push the buzzer and wince slightly at the click that signifies the magnetic lock has been remotely opened for me to enter in. My usual routine had come to be: walk nervously up the two corridors lined with cell doors and ask anyone I see if they were interested in "church". Maybe I would smile at one or two who were around the Officer's station, perhaps stop to admire the colouring in the 43 year old was doing as art therapy. No-one interested? Oh, okay – and I would quickly leave, quite happy to get out of there. It takes a weird place to instill a feeling of relief when you emerge from it into a maximum security prison!

This week no-one is interested in church... but this week is different. I'd been honest with myself and knew that in the past I was too eager to leave: I needed to stay.

I start a conversation with a bloke smoking a cigarette, which begins okay, but quickly three or four others join us, and the talk ranges in subjects from legalising marijuana (the strong majority are in favour), to construction techniques likely used to build Stonehenge. More guys arrive and topics change so fast I doubt if even those with attention deficit disorder can keep pace. I sit. I listen. I smile a lot. Actually, to be honest, I find myself enjoying the time, which surprises me. I end up staying for nearly an hour, and then excuse myself.

"Well guys, this has been fun, but I'm going to have to go" I say, standing and picking up my chalice.

"What about church?" asks one

"Church." I say, as I sit back down and hand out the service sheets and set out the bread and wine. Let's make this fast, I think, "Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open...."

And then I'm aware of the sound I hear each Sunday: voices joining mine in the prayers and hymn, and offering the responses. All of a sudden we are in church, and it's good. I lose myself in the worship.

At the end of the service I pick up my cloths and my chalice, and thank the guys. As some leave the outside area to return to their cells, one of them comes up and asked me if I can help his friend. "He shouldn't be in prison", he says "he needs to be in a hospital". And I can't help but agree, mind you, the guy talking to me looks like that as well. But they don't give chaplains that much power. Someone else comes over: can I get the guy who's curled up in the corner over there a pair of shoes? He bends down and shows me how the soles of the guy's shoes are only barely hanging on. That

much I can get done, and we make plans for the shoes to be delivered. And I realise that God had indeed been here, outside my comfort zone: in the love that these guys are sometimes able to show each other, even in their pain. And because I'd stayed, I'd been able this week to see it. And maybe, just like me, these guys need to see that God is there outside their comfort zones too, after all, they didn't choose to be there and can't choose to leave – and just maybe, because the chaplains visit and sit and listen and pray beside whoever wants to join them... because we testify about the God who still thinks they're worthy of love, and maybe because we stay and testify to that truth in our staying, maybe each week they're able to see it too?

As I walk down the half-lit corridors towards the door, one of the blokes, the one who had been sitting and smoking the cigarette when I'd arrived, comes out of his cell and walks towards me. He holds out his hand to me and we shake. He looks deep into my eyes. "I want to thank you for coming," he says "It means a lot". And he's right... and I'm glad it means a lot to him as well. It's not my turn in that unit next week, but I think I'll go anyway.

PUBLIC HOUSING

EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

The Synod affirmed the value of equal educational opportunities for all children and young people in



The way we were in October!

Australia. It is important for us as Australians and more deeply as Australian Christians. For us as Australians it is an important part of our answer to what kind of nation we want to be.

The 'fair go' ideal still counts in our thinking about ourselves as Australians. The value of equal educational opportunities for all Australian children, properly enacted, is a powerful expression of the 'fair go'. It means all children having equal access to the educational means to live well, to gain employment and to enjoy a fair share of the many different aspects of the common wealth of Australia

The Gonski Report tells us that overall, "Australia has a relatively high-performing schooling system when measured against international benchmarks, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment. However, over the last decade the performance of Australian students has declined at all levels of achievement, notably at the top end. This decline has contributed to the fall in Australia's international position."

"In addition ... Australia has a significant gap between its highest and lowest performing students. This performance gap is far greater in Australia than in many Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries, particularly those with high-performing schooling systems. A concerning proportion of Australia's lowest performing students are not meeting minimum standards of achievement. There is also an unacceptable link between low levels of achievement and educational disadvantage, particularly among students from low socioeconomic and Indigenous backgrounds."

Besides these 'patriotic' reasons for affirming this value there is good reason for us as Australian Christians to affirm this value. There is the great word from Genesis 1:28 and following verses that tell of God creating humankind, male and female, in the image of God and commanding them to be fruitful and multiply and to that end to have real power for good, with the risk of it being used otherwise. Education is one important way we as a nation hand onto future generations, without distinctions, the best of what we have garnered from our use of God's gifts (recognised or not) to all of us for the common good. This line of thought points us towards a theology of education. "Catholic Curriculum: A Mission to the heart of Young People" (Mulgrave: Garratt Publishing, 2012)

A SEMINAR AND A CONFERENCE

OVERSEAS AID

EARTH WORKER