

Talking Cents

July, 2016

Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Auckland Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the Church. Ministry units are encouraged to distribute these articles. This article is contributed by the Reverend Peter Bargh tssf, from the Auckland Anglican Social Justice Group.

Christa Seva Sangha – Servants of Christ?

The world is currently full of uncertainty. Amongst our Five Eyes colleagues, Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom are all facing electoral crises with the future direction of their countries, and those others effected by their decisions, up in the air.

In a less sensational way things remain frustratingly oblique in New Zealand, too, as the Child Poverty Action's Group response to the budget conveys:

"This is not the New Zealand we want and it is not acceptable." John Key was referring to the high and increasing numbers of homeless families with children. It is a surprise then to see this do-little budget from this Government who promised to prioritise alleviating child poverty.¹

Griffith University's Anne Coombs writes: "It's as if the very mechanism we've created to organise ourselves – government – has decided that the one thing it cannot do is organise us."² One sign of this is that "our politicians are burying their heads in the sand."³ At these times it is tempting for us to do just that, too, to put our heads in the sand, or the occasional ecclesiastical equivalent of head-burying...going on retreat!

Who better to lead well churched folk in retreats than those in religious orders? In June I attended one such retreat, which looked at the origins of

contemporary Anglican Franciscans.⁴ These origins lie in two groups of people who sought to live according to Francis' charism. In the 1930s these two groups came together in England and the Society of Saint Francis (SSF) was formed. One of the groups had been based in Dorset, England, at what became Hilfield Friary, where throughout the 1920s they provided care to vagrants and began to live a community life. The other group, however, was based in India.

This community was founded at the height of the British Raj in India. It was a Christian ashram where Indian and British Christians lived, worked and prayed together. This was a prophetic move at the time where divisions between the imperial British presence and rising Indian nationalism led to distrust from both sides, especially in the wake of the Amritsar massacre in 1919.

The ashram community was known as *Christa Seva Sangha* (CSS)– the servants of Christ. The Anglo-Indian community believed that Christianity transcended, and was being held back by, its association with British colonialism. Together, British and Indian members developed the principles by which the community would live. The CSS principles form the basis for most contemporary Anglican Franciscan principles.

The CSS principles focused around work, prayer and study. These would have been recognizable to religious communities in India as well as to European Christian religious communities dating back to the first few centuries of the Common Era. In addition to these traditional personal and communal elements the CSS principles called for

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<http://www.cpag.org.nz/assets/2016%20CPAGBudgetAnalysis%20Summary%20v5.pdf>

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<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/24/it-seems-like-a-good-time-to-ask-what-are-governments-for> She argues that "[t]he focus on growth and security seems to have blinded governments to all else."

³ Ibid.

⁴ Much of the following Franciscan history is drawn from material presented by Brother Christopher John SSF to the annual retreat of the Third Order, Society of Saint Francis in Auckland over June 17-19, 2016.

some of its members to be concerned with “the application of Christian principles to the use and distribution of wealth;” this phrase survives in the contemporary Franciscan principles.⁵

This expression of the Christian faith, coming as it did in a culturally divided, colonial nation at the beginning of the Great Depression, joined together with the practical expression of care found in the nascent Franciscan community in Dorset and the SSF came into being. The SSF community has subsequently been one of the “best kept secrets” of Anglicanism.⁶ Franciscans have been as salt to the Anglican communities, engaging in prophetic work of peace-making, social justice work and loving service.

Simply having a greater awareness of Anglican Franciscan history can fall into the category of enjoying the sand that our heads are buried in. Thankfully, it need not, however; especially if the awareness of the faithfulness of a small community in India, and the subsequent revival of a well-known religious community it inspired, inspires us. The prophetic vision of CSS married with the practical care led to something that has brought life to others.

Last month’s edition of *Talking Cents* looked at the rise of TINA – there is no alternative. TINA emerged when Soviet-style communism was collapsing and it appeared that global capitalism was the best way to organize society.⁷ This was the triumphal height of neoliberalism, although its fruits continue to be experienced now: the gulf between the rich and the poor grows ever wider;

⁵ Christa Seva Sangha “hopes that, in particular, there will be those among its Tertiaries who will be able to further the special aims of the Third Order by contributing, through their researches and writings, to a better understanding of the Church’s worldwide mission, of the use and distribution of wealth, and of all questions that pertain to human brotherhood [sic].” <http://tssf.org/sample-page/the-principles/> Compare the CSS principles to the contemporary principles of the Third Order, Society of Saint Francis – Day 18.

⁶ <http://www.s-s-f.org/>

⁷ <http://www.auckangelican.org.nz/what-we-do/social-justice> See the June, 2016 *Talking Cents*, contributed by David Hall.

and, the question of the just distribution of wealth remains as poignant now as it has ever been.

The hope that inspired the principles of CSS, the hope to seek for a society that better reflected the heavenly vision they shared, is one that is not bound by historical circumstance. Indeed it was their belief that Christianity offered a trans-historical hope that led them to take action that was grounded in their historical circumstance – they founded an Anglo-Indian ashram and encouraged their members to think about the structural challenges that impeded the in-breaking of that heavenly vision into the India of their day.

There are an overwhelming number of economic and social justice issues facing us in our globalised world. Add in apathetic and anti-establishment sentiment together with growing inequality and the diminishment of transparent democratic structures and processes (as in the TPPA); the best response can seem like burying our heads in the sand, agreeing that there is no alternative to the current model which perpetuates and increases these issues.

The reality is that ostriches, the proverbial head in the sand bird, only ever put their heads in the sand to turn the eggs in their nests – to bring life to others. We are called to proclaim the Good News to the world, not to accept that things are dismal and there is no alternative.

Amidst the myriad issues facing us today it can help to focus on one. If we consider the growing issues of homelessness in New Zealand, signs of hope can be seen in events like the Park Up for Homes. There, the marriage between a practical expression of care for those who are homeless and a vision for how to house people in New Zealand is emerging.⁸

In Depression-era British India, the ashram model spoke to the transcendent power of the gospel, which challenges the unjust structures of society, and shaped CSS– the Servants of Christ.

How are we called to be effective servants of Christ today?

⁸ <http://www.cpag.org.nz/campaigns/>