

Talking Cents

September 2016

Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the 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 issue is contributed by Jean Brookes, a member of the Auckland Anglican Social Justice Working Group.

Keeping Hope Alive!

'Place-making' was the theme when about 550 Local Body mayors, other elected representatives and staff met for the Annual Conference of Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ) in July 2016.

The Conference felt some central government policies were bullying local government and threatening the participation of local communities in policy-making processes.

A remit called for 'vigorous' opposition to any measure in the local Government Act 2002 Amendment Bill that directly or indirectly removed the requirement for community consultation and local decision-making for councils. Ninety-seven percent of the participants voted in favour of it.

The Mayor of Gisborne said, "We will join with LGNZ and mayors to ensure the local stays in our local decision-making, and not let the government give our rights to the Local Government Commission" ([http://GisborneHerald.co.nz/localnews/2412161-135/mayors bid to keep 'local' in local government](http://GisborneHerald.co.nz/localnews/2412161-135/mayors%20bid%20to%20keep%20local%20in%20local%20government)).

Inspiring Communities is a New Zealand NGO that particularly enhances neighbourhood 'place-making'. Six of its working principles affirmed the strengths and resilience of participants in its reflection on its work in December 2010. The seventh focussed on 'whole systems change' (What we were learning, Inspiring Communities, December 2010, page 8). All strength-based community work offers neighbourhoods the opportunity to get involved in issues of social justice that affect wider society.

Sometimes a groundswell of citizens feels that both central and local government systems, that exclude swathes of the population, need radical transformation. However, the values driving any

such mass movements will determine whether the marginalised find justice. Distinctive values must include a preferential option for the poor, and becoming companions (real friends) with the marginalised, for some of us following the example of Jesus of Nazareth.

A major revolution of hearts and minds will need to happen in Aotearoa New Zealand if everyone is to have a steady income that enables full participation in society, and the basic human right of a secure, healthy, affordable home.

People of faith are seeking spiritualities that inspire and energise the search for justice. Twenty-first century theologies of the places where we take a stand are critical as we become companions and friends with the poor.

Spiritual mentors past and present who have risked the unknown for the sake of the common good offer their insights. Like the Good Samaritan, we will be called to walk into new relationships where we find liberation together.

- St Francis gave up privilege, wealth and home to live a life of simplicity that challenged the greed of church and society. Today, many women and men seek to follow his example in new forms of the Franciscan spirituality of prayer, work and action.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran theologian and pastor from a noble family. At one stage, he was a German Secret Service double agent, and rescued some Jews. He was privy to plots on Adolf Hitler's life and was arrested by the German regime in April 1943. His guards were astonished by his attitude to them and helped smuggle out his writings to Eberhard Bethge and other friends. His

Christo-centric spirituality bridged dichotomies between faith and political life, as well as daily life, discipleship, lifestyle, human relationships and social action. He was brutally frank about evil yet passionately hopeful about goodness. Bonhoeffer was abruptly executed in Flossenbürg Extermination Camp on 9th April 1945. However, his friends gathered his Letters and Papers from Prison, and other material including sermons. His writings including the *Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together* continue to speak to us in a new era of gross injustice.

- Dorothy Day was a towering spiritual figure in the search for social justice. She co-founded the Catholic Worker movement and railed against the 'rotten, decadent, putrid industrialist capitalist system' (www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday). She died on 29 November 1980.
- Gustavo Gutierrez was recently honoured by Pope Francis as a Liberation Theologian. The reflections of Dr Paul Farmer and Father Gustavo offer crucial insights about a practical commitment to a preferential option for the poor in their spheres of theology and medicine. They have developed a razor-sharp analysis of the structural causes of poverty and ill-health and share examples of how they have strategised for major policy changes (In the *Company of the Poor, Conversations with Dr Paul Farmer & Fr Gustavo Gutierrez*, Edited by Michael Griffin & Jennie Weiss Block, Orbis Books, 2013).

Meanwhile, some evangelical theologians are finding that a 21st century incarnational theology is helping them develop a new commitment to social justice (No home like Place: A Christian Theology of Place, Leonard Hjalmanson, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).

Artists play a very important role in this spiritual quest of our heads and our hearts. They often shake our assumptions of 'home', and where we might discover God. I keep returning to gaze at some of the magnificent range of paintings and photographs in a recent Catholic publication (Act, Love, Walk, Praying in the Josephite Spirit, Ann Gilroy rsj, Colleen O'Sullivan rsj, Anne-Marie Gallagher rsj, Judith Sippel rsj, Trustees of Sisters of St Joseph & the Sacred Heart, Sydney, 2014). Other examples include:

- Sieger Köder is a German Catholic priest whose Biblical depictions speak to place, belonging and crisis (www.Xn—siegerkder-kcb.de).
- Dina Cormick was born in Zimbabwe. Her paintings, ceramics, prints and wood sculptures combine art, theology and feminist thinking. Her *Wisewomen Ikon Triptychs* are sacred encounters (www.creativewomanartist.com).
- He Qui is Chinese and blends folk customs and traditional painting with western art of the Middle & Modern ages (www.hequigallery.com). Some speak of him as the Michelangelo of the 21st century.

Some Auckland Tamaki Regeneration Project residents who were HNZA tenants cry out for policies of equity and sharing: 'We are a community not a commodity', 'We shall not be moved', 'A home for life!', and 'A Place to Call Home'. They challenge people of faith to bring 'market' ideologies to an end.

For some of us the Eucharist is our spiritual 'home' par excellence. It is an intersection of time and infinity, place and space, a sheltered garden and an open desert, acute realism and passionate optimism. God is already among those of us who are rich and powerful and need less, those of us who are satisfied and need to take responsibility for the common good, and those of us who are poor and need more. We gather around symbols of liberation for ourselves, the church and the whole of society.

The Reverend Hillary Russell recently researched themes for ministry in the UK (*Faithful Presence, Working Together for the Common Good*, Hilary Russell, SCM Press, 2015). They included:

- the most vulnerable people and neighbourhoods;
- social and economic policies and institutions;
- the impact of austerity measures on inequality;
- (non-party) 'political territory';
- supporting the role of the laity in the interface between church and society.

Swami Agnivesh, a Director of the International Centre for Inter-religious and Intercultural Dialogue based in Vienna put it this way, 'In the days ahead we may not have any use for a spirituality that leaves the oppressors untroubled' (*Applied Spirituality*, Swami Agnivesh, p66, Harper Element, 2015).

Advocating with the poor is not easy. Will our spirituality help us all keep hope alive?