

# Talking Cents

November 2014

**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 Kevin McBride of Pax Christi Aotearoa-New Zealand.**

## Living in Troubled Times

They're rioting in Africa, there's strife in Iran  
What Nature doesn't do to us will be done by our Fellow Man

(From "A Merry Minuet" written by Sheldon Harnick in the 1960s and popularised by the Kingston Trio and Tom Lehrer).

We live in troublous times. Each day, the popular news is led by stories of the advance of irregular forces throughout troubled regions of the Middle East, specifically Syria and Iraq, with the potential to disarrange existing regional structures and borders in the interests of an as-yet-undefined Caliphate. These are supported in social media by graphic images of bloody executions and massacres. Such is the complexity of alliances within this conflict, that some of the nations funding its extension seem, at the same time, to be joining a coalition to confront it with military force. Meanwhile, those seeking to support the military coalition, such as our own Prime Minister, do so by instigating fear and insecurity, raising the possibility of beheadings in our own streets in imitation of those that have taken place half a world away.

At the same time, tensions in Europe, which seemed to have abated with the end of the Cold War, are rising again with confrontations between NATO-led nations and Russia over the historically-disputed region of Ukraine. All this, exacerbated by the shooting-down of a Malaysian airliner, could, we are warned, bring us close again to the possibility of a nuclear confrontation.

As well as all this, we are threatened with the spread of an almost uncontrollable

hemorrhagic disease, ebola, which has taken hold in West Africa and through one source and another is being suspected in countries as close as our neighbour, Australia, as well as being actually discovered in highly-developed countries like the USA.

If we needed more, we are also threatened by climate change, and, according to the media, along with a fall in returns to the staple of our economy, dairying, the need to arm our police because of growing levels of violence in our community, perhaps caused by perceived growing levels of inequality.

Yet, in spite of obvious issues needing clear and positive attention, our recent elections were more of a popularity contest, backed by revelations of "dirty politics" and aggressive interviewing styles, with little attention given to which policies might bring about a more equitable and just society founded on the common good. And the new government, secure in its majority support, seems to be giving priority in facing the challenges of the day to costly referenda on changing our flag.

Troublous times, indeed, seemingly echoing those which led Irish poet W B Yeats to deliver his 1919 commentary on the period following World War 1:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.  
(*"The Second Coming"*, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939).

Two weeks travelling in the South Island, mainly in small towns and rural areas with very little attention to either television or major media outlets, presented me with a different view. Even in small so-called "zombie" towns like Reefton, we found successful small businesses catering to school-holiday "tourists" run by cheerful entrepreneurs who were driven by an overall positive community spirit looking for better times around the corner.

More progressive towns like Akaroa and Cromwell are building a reputation for hospitality and service to travellers seeking to explore the simple pleasure of visiting almost-unpromoted scenic features and small local industries. These include cheese-making and wineries, or trails around historic sites like gold-fields and whaling stations. It was also enlightening to note how many of these historic sites featured acknowledgement of Tangata Whenua through alternative naming and, frequently, pictorial and written references in museums and at public sites. We felt there a greater sense of community than is usually common in the hurly-burly of city life, and associated with that was a greater sense of hope for the future.

The experience recalled to me a book I was recently asked to review. Neil Darragh's *But is it Fair?* brings together the experience of 30 individuals and groups committed to addressing social, political and cultural issues in their communities. They represent a wide range of faiths and beliefs but are united in their firm commitment to justice and the promotion of the common good. The ecumenical group which creates the monthly

*Talking Cents* is one of those represented and its chapter sets out its origins as a means of presenting alternative economic views to those behind the prevalence of market-led and neo-liberal forces dominant since the 1990s.

Other contributors come from Christian, Muslim, secular and humanitarian backgrounds but all are working at community level to develop faith and values-based, social, cultural and political responses to the issues which oppress and diminish the integrity and self-belief of too many. Their stories are more marked by struggle than success but in all cases, they represent a common intent to acknowledge and enhance the intrinsic human dignity of all people and to recreate a sense of community in the groups they bring together or address.

It is a remarkable book but more than that, it is a hope-filled book. It re-affirms the right and indeed, the duty, of all citizens, but particularly faith-based communities acting as part of civil society, to ensure that democratic government is really "of the people and by the people" rather than merely "for the people". It encourages us to look beyond the "virtual reality" promoted in the headlines and TV bulletins to the here-and-now needs of real people to be able to live as themselves in caring and supportive communities in a sustainably-managed world founded on genuine human and ecological values.

Above all, it gives us somewhere to go and something to do in situations which could create in us a sense of powerlessness and even despair - a foundation of hope on which to exercise the faith and love to which we are called.