

*ICDF NEWSLETTER — APRIL 2016: “Dance//Dancers//Art & Social Concern”*

LAST WEEK MY EMPLOYER SENT ME TO A CULTURAL AWARENESS DAY

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Last week my employer sent me to a Cultural Awareness Training day. Alongside a dozen other staff members of varying ranks in my human services organization, we were taught many things about Aboriginal history, culture and social justice issues which have a strong bearing upon our work with indigenous clients. At the end of the day, several of the trainers expressed to me that I know a lot more about the topic than most people do, know many people of note within the Australian Aboriginal community and that I could probably train others about the things being taught that day. While being told that didn't surprise me, it was a real privilege and honour to hear that being said by Aboriginal trainers and staff present. The reason it didn't surprise me was simple. My knowledge of the general topic is the legacy of about 30 years of other people – Christian social justice leaders, assorted creative artists of many genres, Aboriginal/Church elders, activist-mentors, social welfare work colleagues and my amazing wife - introducing me constantly to Aboriginal people, their culture, stories and community on numerous occasions. Relationship matters.

I also owe a lot which I have learnt about Aboriginal culture and the social justice issues affecting the Aboriginal people over the past 15 years to my wife Lucy, an artist who has for a long time danced with, mixed with, made community with, and advocated for them as their partner in faith, art and community. That journey also involved me and had inspired me immensely. Journey with others matters.

It's also not surprising that my Christian journey has always had a social justice and artistic bent to it. From watching Dr Martin Luther King Jnr's humble funeral procession as a 13 year old, hearing his amazing speeches, and being converted as a 17 year old through the highly social activist and artistic 1970's Jesus People movement, my faith journey has always had a counter-cultural and prophetically-inclined shape to it. My early choice of involvement in the Australian Baptist Church and later Churches of Christ – both movements which strongly emphasize the importance of engaging in incarnational mission involving social justice mission alongside the poor and needy – helped me to appreciate the enormous importance of Church speaking up for the rights of the poor and vulnerable as well as doing practical things personally and collectively to help people in dire need of social assistance, such as the homeless, the ageing, and those

struggling with mental illness, addictions or in need of help in a crisis. Theological formation matters.

Something I also discovered along my 62 year long journey was that, when people speak up for social justice for the poor and needy, it usually offends more than it gets applause. From my own observations that offence response more often than not today is from politically conservative, wealthy businessmen and, most unfortunately, evangelical Christians, who share large amounts of that wealth, power and influence with their secular peers. Courage matters.

Well, it was the same in Jesus' time. Jesus shared the Nazareth Manifesto, Luke 4:18-19: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord". Then after Jesus put that message into a 'home truth' context message to the religious folk of his hometown, they got outraged and then tried to murder him. They liked his message (Luke 4: 20-22) – that is, until Jesus applied it practically to them during his teaching which followed! (Luke 4:23-30). "Counting the cost" of being honest in telling others about things "as they are" matters.

Many Christians, including many in the creative arts also appear to not like that same message. Nor do they like it when Christian activists, including artists, speak out for justice for the poor and needy when it exposes things like greed, ignorance and prejudice which implicates their complicity with the institutional powers and principalities of politics, wealth and economics within the status quo framework of 'how things are'. Especially what is said is found disagreeable to their 'bottom line', which is not normally about increasing social justice and equity for the poor. Most often I find that the loudest voices against Christian social activism occurring in the Church today are from declared Christians of one conservative brand of politics or another trying to hoist their dictatorial brands of lording it over everybody else, without much reference to the social justice implications of the wider Biblical text. Being different to the abiding "status quo" matters where Jesus' values and those values collide.

When we began the ICDF Network for Social Concern and the Arts 14 years ago, it was birthed out of deep concerns that a lot of what was called "Christian creative arts" had become polarised into epics of worship-focused hype and self-indulgence. It was stuff that we did because it made us feel good, and made us feel 'more good' as we did it. We shopped around for it and if a church didn't have it, we bypassed them and went elsewhere. It had very little to do with proclaiming the same Nazareth Manifesto and

vision which Jesus based his own mission and ministry upon. Jesus' mission was decidedly counter-cultural to the status quo religiosities which had embedded themselves politically and economically into the oppressive religious-political institutional domains of his time. In the same way, I think we can observe how some in Evangelical Conservative politics today, have fallen into an adulterous marriage with the precipitators and promoters of ostentatious wealth, militaristic might, economic oligarchies, and ultra-conservative power politics of today. It is not a pretty picture. Nor is it a situation that is kind, merciful or gracious toward the poor. Mercy, compassion, grace, love and kindness matter.

Thankfully, many in the Christian creative arts scene have rediscovered the voice of Jesus' Nazareth manifesto today. Art – good art – which changes the world for the better – usually comes with a counter-culturally redemptive voice or voices to it. It, as Brueggemann says, is birthed through and expresses “prophetic imagination”. It provides a counter-narrative of truth, meaning and hope to the metanarratives of fear, perpetual loss, meaninglessness and despair that seem to be the dominant voices of that existing status quo of our present age. We need more of voice of Spirit inspired “prophetic imagination” from our Christian creative artists which speaks to major social justice issues today. The best of those “prophetic” voices of artists will come from those who not only “say”, but “do” – who immerse themselves personally in day to day acts of kindness, generosity and humble service, and who advocate compassion and fairness for those far less fortunate than them within their local community spheres of influence. Some of those “prophetically imaginative” artists will, and must be, Christian dancers! Jesus' alternative narrative and vision for a better world to the one of ignorance, despair and godlessness that currently shapes things matters and is in ongoing conflict with the dominant secular “status quo”.

I'm not trying to offend but happy if what I say offends because without some offence, nothing gets debated and truth-telling reality gets put on the back-burner. Without someone getting their `noses out of joint' as part of their thinking being challenged, and provoked to change (metanoia or repentance in another direction), nothing can get changed for the wider social justice and redemptive betterment. Good art – art which probes into truth, provokes us to hear, to see, to feel the truth, and to do something societally redemptive in response to it – is often provocative and inevitably offends some, if not in some instances, many people.

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