

**“The Walk after the Walk  
– one year on - reflections  
on Walk for the Planet & future hopes”**

**A talk to SpiritGreens/Walk for the Planet  
@ St. Marks Somerfield  
on 21<sup>st</sup> February, 2010 at 4.00pm**

I'd like to begin with a few lines from an inspiring book I read on holiday recently.

*“Public marches mingle the language of the pilgrimage, in which one walks to demonstrate one’s commitment, with the strike’s picket line and the festival, in which the boundaries between strangers recede. Walking becomes testifying.*

*There are many ways to measure the effectiveness of protest. There’s its impact on the wider public, directly and through the media, and there’s its impact on the government – on its audiences. But what’s often forgotten is its impact on the protestors, who themselves suddenly become the public in literal public space, no longer an audience but a force.*

*In those moments of moving through the streets with people who share one’s beliefs comes the rare and magical possibility of a kind of populist communion”.*  
[“Wanderlust – A History of Walking” – by Rebecca Solnit]

**Genesis**

Walk for the Planet emerged from the creative chaos of the 2008 School of Theology for the lower South Island Methodist synods in Queenstown.

At this event, fellow SpiritGreen Jan Fogg, and I, had led a full afternoon session on Climate Change, Peak Oil and Greening the Church. During a dinner conversation that night with Jim Stuart, the possibility of a walk similar to the Hikoi of Hope, but focusing on the growing global ecological crises arose.

By the time I returned home to Christchurch I was determined to not let the embryo that had been conceived die. A few weeks later I invited half a dozen people to join me at Sand Dance Café in New Brighton for a conversation about making the walk a reality.

The warm hospitality of the café and the prayerful, hopeful way we met provided an environment optimal for life and growth. For a few months the conversation continued and other people became involved. After meeting a few times a decision was made to commit ourselves to the project.

**The walk before the walk**

I took on the role of chairing our meetings and co-ordinating the whole thing. The primary task was building a network of regional coordinators and groups from scratch who could take responsibility for the walk in their region as it moved from

Rakiura to Wellington. Alongside this we also needed to build an organisational infrastructure from scratch that included everything from a website and logo; T-shirts and banners; to support vehicles and transit New Zealand compliance.

At every step of the 10-month organising process I had a strong sense of being led by providence. This walk before the walk deepened my sense of the spiritual basis of the whole project. Each time we hit a crisis a way would open up before us that we had not considered.

In the last few months the coordinating role became increasingly demanding. I negotiated with my parish leaders here at St. Marks, and they graciously agreed to gift up to half of my time to the walk until it was over. They saw it as part of their mission as a parish to support the walk.

### **The Lenten walk**

My full-time involvement in the first week of the “Walk” on Rakiura and in Southland was one of the highlights of my 12-year ministry. Building the small on-road team, connecting with local communities and churches; hearing first-hand, inspirational stories of grassroots initiatives, and acting as spokesperson with our message of caring for God’s creation was hugely enriching and exciting.

Launching the walk with locals on the Ringaringa golf course on Rakiura - overlooking the Southern Ocean - was a moving, spine-tingling event. The first full day of walking from Bluff to Invercargill through wetlands and mist with my nine year old son and many people I got to know on the way will be etched in my memory forever.

One of the strongest dimensions of the on the road experience for me was witnessing to life on State Highway One, a place so often hostile to life. Walking on it was a way of reclaiming it for life. Walking where many told us it was too dangerous to. Appreciating the trees and paddocks and wetlands and birds along the way in a way not possible in a metal capsule travelling at 100kph+. Highways are often places of death not just for people but for countless animals and birds. We saw evidence of this “roadkill” many times.

But it was the unseen “roadkill” that we were also walking for. Our highways are the place where we burn colossal amounts of the fossil fuels that pollute the atmosphere and contribute to climate change. The impact of this deepening crisis on poor communities and endangered species is beyond measure.

Highways are above all places where we are out of touch with the community of life to which we belong. We see scenery whizzing by but we have no sense of relationship. For me walking the highway was a way of finding missing connection.

After that first week I was not on the road but my responsibilities of overall coordinator were intense and constant. At points along the way as the walk slowly moved north I was able to reconnect with the walkers and joined the longest cycling leg on a stunning day along the Kaikoura coast. But mostly I held things together and helped ease the way of those on the road.

Near the end things got particularly frayed but the walk successfully reached the destination in Picton, and then Wellington. During Holy Week with the small on-road team in meltdown it was as if the Passion Story was being lived out amongst us. I reflected on the cost of witnessing to life in the midst of death in our culture, and the importance of deep community to the process of true transformation. To be change-makers we too need to change. Long-lasting change can only be sustained if we begin to live out of a new model and lifestyle. I believe that we fool ourselves if we think we can save the earth without radical personal change that is built on community and spiritual foundations.

There were other disappointments... Because we were at times very thin on the ground, especially in sparsely populated areas with small churches it was difficult to collect stories of hope all the way as we had intended, and to communicate our message through the media, particularly television and radio. All our dwindling energy was focussed on getting to the next point along the way.

Nonetheless, the enduring value of the Walk was the inspiration and sense of community that it engendered along the way for many people who share a common love of creation and concern for what is happening to it. There was a strong spirituality of pilgrimage, ecological care, community and hope flowing through the whole event. People from outside the churches found a place in which they could join with those within the church to communicate a fresh expression of faith. New friendships and relationships were formed that continue to bear fruit eight months later. The Walk gave birth to a network that could be the basis of further engagement and mission.

## **The Walk after the Walk**

### **The political context**

What I have come to call the Walk after the Walk goes on and is in many ways more challenging. Making the shift from the challenge of walking the length of Te Waipounamu (the South Island) relay style to transforming our everyday local lifestyles – is hard. We never make this “walk” in a vacuum. In Aotearoa New Zealand we live in an increasingly challenging and hostile context for those who are committed to caring for creation. Why do I say this? Let me briefly look at two of the realities that contribute to this hostility.

- **The Key government agenda**

In The Press on February 9, 2009 the Prime Minister, is reported to be angered by Reserve Bank Governor Alan Bollard’s assertion that the wage gap with Australia cannot be closed. At a post-cabinet press conference he later acknowledged that it will be difficult to catch up, but it is possible.

Key is quoted as saying: “There’s no getting away from the fact that Australia is minerally wealthy but does that mean New Zealand can’t close the gap and hopefully eliminate the gap with Australia? I would say no. It is an aspirational goal but I also think it is realistic. I think we can get there”.

He went on to say that New Zealand has an abundance of water, which Australia does not. While the Government has not specifically investigated exporting water there are opportunities for its use, including irrigation.

He emphasized that “Irrigation presents a huge opportunity – (and that) there’s a million hectares of land that could be irrigated properly in New Zealand and have quite a substantial impact on our GDP”.

Later in his speech outlining Government priorities at the opening of Parliament his focus was simple – the primary goal of this government is “to raise the standard of living of New Zealanders through strong economic growth”. Care of the environment was not one of the priorities he outlined.

At his request he said that all ministers had looked closely at their individual sectors (quote) “through an economic growth lense”. (unquote) In this task they were asked to identify areas (quote) “where the government could remove barriers that prevent resources being used productively” (unquote)

Then in a section entitled “Unlocking resources” (now we know the significance of his name). I suggest it should have been subtitled: “Greying the Long White Cloud” he goes on to signal “where consistent with our environmental conservation and other objectives (these are not detailed), during this year the government will progress an action plan to unlock New Zealand’s petroleum potential”.

Then later...”There is also extraordinary economic potential in the mineral estate residing in Crown-Owned land....

“I can assure New Zealander’s that any new mines on conservation land will have to meet strict environmental tests (once again no indicators are given of what these will be)”. Note that this needs to be heard alongside the growing litany of reversals this government has made to environmental policy advances made in recent decades. In other words assurances made about good environmental care should be taken with a grain of salt in light of the poor track record the National government has so far made.

He announces that a Conservation Fund will be established – drawing on royalties from mining. All of which means if there is an increase in mining activity, New Zealand’s natural environment will also be improved”. Nothing is said here about how and where this improvement will happen.

“The government will also take action this year to remove particular regularity roadblocks to water storage and irrigation in Canterbury”.

He then offers a warm fuzzy to Fonterra in saying “the government will ensure that the New Zealand dairy industry continues to operate efficiently and economic growth is maximised”.

In response to questions in Parliament over the following week the Prime Minister indicated that he has a problem with water in our rivers reaching the ocean. He sees this as a waste. It would seem that under his government our Canterbury rivers will not be allowed to flood anymore. Flood waters will all be siphoned off into irrigation schemes for the insatiable dairy industry.

In the nineteenth century there was a huge land grab and the wild Maori were dispossessed of land that they were seen to be wasting. Now the lucrative commodity is water and it too is seen as been wasted in wild rivers. Powerful interests now want control of rivers as well as the land. Our rivers are seen not as living systems with intrinsic value but simply as a commodity to be owned and controlled for private gain.

Note that The Press reports last week that NZ has plummeted in international environmental rankings. This fits with a government that has in not much more than a year systematically backed off a whole raft of environmental care provisions built up over recent decades.

- **Post-Copenhagen Summit**

We are also living in the months following the abject failure of the Climate Change Summit in December to sufficiently address this growing global crisis. Our government contributed to this failure with a very weak position – that was more concerned with protecting and enhancing economic advantage; than reducing out of control carbon emissions, and upholding social, inter-generational and eco-justice. New Zealand's emissions continue to grow.

## **A NEED FOR A NEW APPROACH?**

- Eco faith/green congregations in the U.S.
- Eco congregation movement in the U.K.

We need to build a movement here in Aotearoa New Zealand, comparable to the nuclear free movement of late 70's, early 80's - a period when many Churches declared their properties nuclear free. There is much work to be done to build up an eco-faith movement with deep enough roots to bring about lasting change.

However we also need to be aware of the difficulties of building strong movements for change in a post 1984 world – with the lasting legacy of the adoption of free market economic policies here in Aotearoa New Zealand. This “revolution” in Aotearoa New Zealand has created strong forces against community-based initiatives. The dominant culture is now much more driven by self-interest and consumerist values.

The context we live in and the challenges we face require new models of being faith communities for change if we are to be truly prophetic and hope-bearing in these times. This was coined in a different way by the U.S. United Methodist bishops in a pastoral letter to their church in November 2009. They said “we cannot help the world until we change our way of being in it”.

Increasingly my mind has been focused on pioneering and promoting eco-faith community and action in Christchurch city where I live. I would like to finish by sharing with you the bones of an idea I am currently working on.

### **“The River of Life” mission project**

It is now sixty years ago that the Methodist connexion formalised the work of the Christchurch Methodist Mission with the appointment of Rev. Wilf Falkingham. The Mission had its origins in the work initiated by Gardner Miller at the end of the 1930's on the cusp of the Second World War. The full establishment of the Mission in 1951 provided a clear focus for social service outreach with a Methodist flavour in Christchurch.

The Mission has been through many changes and developments since those early years. But it has always had a clear social service and justice purpose. The current mission of the Mission is “to promote social justice through partnerships that strengthen families and build fair and safe communities”.

This passion for social justice flows from the Methodist ethos that originated in the mission of John Wesley to the poor and marginalized people of the United Kingdom in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as the process of industrialization cut a swathe through his society.

This is an aspect of our tradition that we have continued to value and resource as a church. However there was another aspect of Wesley's mission that we have largely forgotten or discarded that speaks to the growing ecological crises of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Wesley has been described by some as being a ‘seminal environmentalist’, and was ahead of his time in recognising the sacredness of all of God's creation and our human responsibility to be caretakers of it. He passionately preached that we need to work towards the redemption of all of creation not just human beings. He was a strong supporter of the emerging animals rights movement. He said, “Faith in Jesus Christ can and will lead us beyond an exclusive concern for the well-being of other human beings to the broader concern for the well-being of the birds in our back yards, the fish in our rivers, and every living creature on the face of the earth”.

Isn't it time we addressed the anthropocentric imbalance we have practiced in our mission for a long time? I believe that the parlous state of God's creation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires us to engage intentionally and urgently in eco-mission. We need to dedicate people and financial resources to establish such a mission with passion and fortitude. Such a project would represent a fresh expression of what it means to be the church and to be in right relationship with creation.

A working name for this venture could be “Te Awa Wai Ora/The River of Life”. It is a rich biblical metaphor for eco-mission in the greater Canterbury context. In Ezekiel 47 we are given a wonderful picture of the river of life. Like all rivers, the river of life begins as a small trickle that grows into a mighty river too deep to stand in.

For many of our rivers this God-given way of being is under threat from consumerist lifestyles and industrial farming. The well-being of our rivers, and the control and use of their water is the biggest political and economic issue in this region. There are those who consider it wasteful to allow rivers to flow into the Pacific Ocean. Like the shepherd prophet Amos we too need to cry “let justice flow like a stream, and right relations like a river that never goes dry” (Amos 5:24).

The image of the river of life flowing out from the temple in Revelation 22 is a holistic vision of hope for the future. It celebrates the fullness of shalom for a new heaven and a new earth – not another earth but earth community redeemed and made whole.

A braided river, as we have in our region, is always changing, it is a dynamic living thing with multiple channels and this represents well the model of faith community envisaged in this proposal.

“The River of Life”, would above all, be a dispersed community covenanted to a common vision of eco-mission and a simple rule of life for their everyday lives. The focus of this ‘rule’ would include the practice of environmental holiness through the grace of God; financial commitment to the mission project and support of each other.

Members would carry on the work of “The River” wherever they live and work in partnership with others sharing a similar vision. Clusters could meet for regular learning, support and spiritual sustenance, especially those most widely dispersed.

However there would also be a physical base or centre; maybe a house, rented or owned by the church. This could be the base for worship, educational events and administration.

The day to day running of the base could be the responsibility of a mix of paid people and volunteers; and possibly short-term interns who could live on site in-community.

The operation of the centre would be ecologically sustainable. High importance would be given to achieving high energy efficiency, zero waste and carbon neutrality. A community garden would also be an integral part of the centre.

A range of possible mission initiatives that could flow out of this community include: a small eco-theology institute for the ongoing development of eco-theology in the local context and resourcing ecotheologians; sponsoring seminars and workshops on urban green lifestyles and eco-justice; a conservation volunteers programme; wilderness retreats; Walk for the Planet type initiatives; inter-faith conversations; greening neighbourhoods initiatives; resourcing churches and community groups; an eco-theology library; and interactive website; political action campaigns in partnership with other groups; active support programme for workers in the front-line of conservation work; developing contextual liturgies and worship resources.

Through all of this, and more, “The River” could provide a supportive gathering space for green-oriented people and groups; a place for building common ground; a means for celebrating, nurturing and communicating a green gospel where the good news is preached to all of creation; a movement and flow towards eco-justice and right relations with the earth.

**Mark Gibson**