

An interview with Warren Simmons

It can sometimes be just a fleeting moment when our senses are attuned to God that we find our life direction and healing. In this interview with Warren Simmons I was struck by just such moments that have had profound effects on his steadfast sense of purpose throughout his long career as a Social Worker and how an intense experience of the Divine has brought him healing, love and a new found closeness with God. **Anne Bonnefin**

Anne: It seems to me that all your life you have felt a challenge to action – to bring about God’s kingdom on earth. Would I be right in saying that’s how you have engaged with the mission of Christ?

Warren: Certainly, my decision to be a social worker and work with children was central to my faith. Becoming a professional in that regard was all due to the church. It was not something I would have thought of doing otherwise. I didn’t think I had the capacity. Geoff Spencer challenged us in a sermon at a Wandell residential at Leichardt church. He said that if you have knowledge and skills you have a responsibility to use them for God’s purposes. It was like he was talking to me. Later I talked with Ray Burdekin and Jeff Robinson and I said "That really impacted me! I've got a few brains I think I should possibly try and go to university." and both of them said. "There’s nothing to think about!" They were so adamant.

So I signed up to complete matriculation at Tafe. I would work all day and study at night. My wife at the time had dinner on the table when I got home at 10pm. The first year I attended Tafe over 4 nights, the second year over 3 nights. It was a huge undertaking. The rate of people dropping out was something to see. The first night of class every seat was full, with people standing around the room, but in 3 months there were 3 of us left in the front row. Just 3 of us!

Anne: And you went on from that to study Social Work?

Warren: I did very, very well with my Tafe studies and as a result of that I obtained a scholarship for Social Work at Sydney University through the Child Welfare Department and they paid me an allowance while I studied. I also topped the Social Work course at university. Not the top academic, but we had practical work to undertake and I topped the course in the social work component. I spent four and quarter years at university and that led into my career in Social Work that spanned 41 years.

Anne: What would you consider some of your achievements?

Warren: Well, certainly I was a pioneer in Child Protection in 1974 at the Children's Hospital. Mostly I worked with children and families though I did do marriage counselling as well. I also became a counsellor in the church - counselling couples.

I set up the first relationship sex education courses for disabled kids in 1971. I don’t think anyone had run a group before then. I was approached by the Senior Social Worker at Northcott Disability Services (NSW Society for Crippled Children). We started with clients who were late adolescence/early adulthood with Duchenne's muscular dystrophy (DMD). They were all in wheelchairs and had very limited movement - just

one finger. But you only need one finger to operate an electric wheelchair. The 'powers that be' held out for years against electric wheelchairs - they didn’t want to lose control.

It became apparent to us that this group of young people were only saying to us what we wanted to hear so we confronted them on this. And they said, "Well when you only have one finger to move you have to be careful." They told us, "You can be put out in the sun and left there for punishment if you don't tow the line." One said "Did they think we were going to run away?"

Anne: So you were able to help them?

Warren: I don’t know if the young people were treated any better in the home but at least we helped them to better articulate their needs.

Anne: It was a justice and freedom issue wasn’t it?

Warren: Absolutely! As was my work in eliminating the cane in NSW Schools. We worked for seven years to have this banned. How can you work in child protection where schools are assaulting kids and feel justified in doing it? I was branded a radical for my stance – It was a shame but that’s the price you pay and I’ve just had to pay it.

Anne: What do you think God is calling the church to do?

Warren: The one solid thing that the church has always held onto and was central to the Restoration Movement was the call of Zion. To this day I remain inspired by the work of Dick Nies. Dick wrote about his understanding of the Zion call. It was about people coming together to look at issues that concern them and then taking action – locally, nation-wide and world-wide. You have to study and the Spirit of discernment will come to you. But not without work. You know you just don’t sit there and think it is all going to come to you. We have to study it out.

Anne: So you think God is calling us to be change agents?

Warren: Yes to be change agents - being known not by word but by deed.

Anne: What do you say to people who say this isn’t our role?

Warren: I’d say "If this is not your conception of Zion then tell me what is?" We’ve got to stop being a Sunday morning club. This goes way beyond a Sunday morning club .

We don’t want to necessarily copy or duplicate what is already in existence so we need to work out other areas that maybe are not being addressed or they might be being addressed but they don’t have

the expertise and we could come in and provide that expertise.

Anne: So we need to align our resources, our study, our expertise and our action?

Warren: Yes and if you don't have the expertise we need to bring it in.

Anne: Is it about thinking what can I do where I live? You have to be a little selective don't you?

Warren: Yes - needs are endless - resources are limited. That's what politics is about. But anything like this is political. It can easily get political. and I think that frightens people in the church.

Anne: Why does it frighten people?

Warren: It is an unknown and involves conflict which unsettles people. Perhaps they don't see it as our role..

Anne: But you've been political all your life haven't you? You haven't shyed away from being political?

Warren: Yes that's right - and eventually it destroyed my career. I was blocked from senior roles and had to leave Sydney to find work in London Sometimes though, to change things you have to make noise.

Anne: How do you think God engages with the world?

Warren: That's a difficult one because I've come to realise that we are born and called to live this life with all its difficulties. God works within us - I definitely believe that. A lot of times though I think. "Why is not God acting?" There are dreadful things that happen. It breaks MY heart - what does it do to God's heart? So I think God must be in mourning most of the time for his creation. Direct action is very difficult to ascertain at times.

Anne: God weeps?

Warren: Yes.... God weeps.

Anne: How have you engaged with God throughout your life? Has it been a constant thing?

Warren: Yes - I felt I was answering my calling as I studied and worked and used my expertise to help the community and people. I could visit a family a few times and I could tell you exactly what was going on and very often I could tell you how it was all going to end up. I developed a deep knowledge of how children grow and when they are not developing and which parents did not have a clue about parenting and how to work with them.

Anne: In 2003 you had what I would call a Spiritual Emergence. Can you share about your experience?

Warren: Well I had a deeply mystical experience that was healing, transformative and changed my whole relationship with the Divine. There is no other experience that I have had in my life that has come close to this. The depth of it, the overwhelming love and immense sense of unity. I felt so tiny and at the same time I felt this is too much - I don't deserve this sort of love and acceptance. At first there was a sense of fear but my fear became overshadowed by Love. It was very strong - I was overwhelmed with the sense of the Divine. It was pretty unusual - definitely extraordinary. I think I may now be a mystic. I don't know how many experiences you have to have to be a mystic, but this experience continued for four hours. After it I could read things from the inside. Some time later I was given a book written by a 12th -13th century priest - *The Cloud of Unknowing* and I understood it easily. The book was instructions for a younger priest on how to make contact with God and everything in the book made absolute sense to me.

Anne: Did you have a sense of Oneness?


Warren: Well I call this visitor 'The One' - Yes a huge sense of unity. Whether one of three or which one of the three I have no idea. But it had a distinct unity to it. Now I pray to The One. Dear One.... I could never love like this love. It's a disembodied love but it is the purest love. It couldn't have ugly bad thoughts - it wasn't capable of it.

Anne: Did you dialogue with the Divine?

Warren: We were in constant communication, with the Divine presence sharing whole meanings rather than words. It culminated in the gift of divine ecstasy, a magnificent extraordinary experience that language fails to capture - truly ineffable.

Anne: I'm wondering whether this encounter with The One/ Divinity has been healing for you in the long term? Have you looked back and felt that it was a healing experience?

Warren: Oh yes.. the warmth, the fire through my body.. I was told that was to heal all the pain and all the disappointments. Now it hasn't all gone away but certainly there is a difference between before and after the encounter. I feel 'lighter', but still don't fully understand the experience; but then I wouldn't have missed it for quids.. beautiful, beautiful, beautiful.



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