

Leigh Lonsdale talks with Anne Bonnefin about risk taking, our openness to failure and holding space for each other.



Anne: Hi Leigh, its great you are able to share with me.

Leigh: Hi Anne, it's lovely to be with you today.

Anne: Leigh can you tell us something about yourself.

Leigh: Sure Anne – These days I work as a Counsellor in my own practice in Bendigo, which is a regional city in North Central Victoria. My husband and I live on 31 acres of land, on the south side of Bendigo, in a lovely mud brick home. We only moved to Bendigo a little over 3 years ago. Together, we have raised 5 children. And just so you can all make the connection, Ben Smith our President, is my 2nd oldest. So all our kids are married now with children of their own. Between them all we have 10 grandchildren. As for how I'm connected to Community of Christ.....well, I am the youngest of 4 kids born to Max and Norma Lonsdale, both were active members and ministers in the church, so I grew up in this community. Some of you listening might know my brother Peter in Perth. I also have a sister Robyn, who is the Pastor of the church in NZ, and I have another sister Josie, who lives in Melbourne. It was really clear to me though from a very young age, that the message of Jesus was important to me, and I knew for certainty when I was 8, that the only natural thing for me to do was be baptized into this faith community. So I grew in my faith here initially, but later in life furthered my religious and theological studies at University. I've held several roles within the priesthood of the church. I was ordained to Priest in 1987, then later to Elder in the 1996, and then to Seventy in 2002. I worked full time for the church from 2002 to 2010, holding various roles, but predominantly that of Compassionate Ministries Consultant to the congregations in the Victoria Network. I resigned from church employment in 2010 after going through a period of high stress, burn out and major clinical depression. Around the same time, my husband was offered a promotion with his employer, and that took us to Malaysia, where we lived for 2 years. I used that time as an opportunity to be kind to myself – so I took up photography, hosted lots of visitors, made new friends and joined a charity

that supported orphaned disabled children. We came back to Oz in 2012, and have moved twice since then, but we're now really settled on our little property. I recently began more studies that are helping me grow as a person but are building my counselling skills and I'm really loving it.

Anne: You and I were talking the other day about courage, risk taking and coping with failure. It would be great if you could share some of your thoughts about these from your perspective as a counsellor and minister in Community of Christ.

Leigh: Yes....risk.....failure! We each respond differently to these words hey. Some of us go searching for opportunities to undertake risky or new activities because of the thrill and challenge it brings, while others won't attempt anything new for fear of getting it wrong, or getting hurt, or fear of being judged somehow. I remember when my husband and I decided to take the opportunity to live in Malaysia for a couple of years. Some people said to us at the time, "that's a pretty risky thing to be doing at this point in your lives isn't it?" and when I'd ask "what do you mean, risky?" for them the risk was about financial stability, "what about your kids, what if something goes wrong, what if you get sick, what if someone back home gets sick, what will you do if a family member died and you weren't here with them when that happened, what if the job doesn't work out?" While these were all factors which we considered, from our perspective we were thinking, "what if we never get this kind of opportunity again, how wonderful it will be to live in a different country, to experience immersing ourselves into another culture, what good timing this is for me to be able to recover physically and emotionally?" Our response to the fears others were projecting onto us was... If anything should happen, we'll just come home, and we'll deal with whatever we need to deal with. In fact, there were some hick-ups toward the end of our stay there, and it was certainly not a smooth transition once we returned home, but neither of us felt that we should not have gone. Whilst the concerns of others were valid, and as I said they certainly were things

we considered, we measured those risks against the value of the opportunity before us, and made our decision accordingly. But here's the difference I think. Both Jamie and I are people who do not attach our *sense of worth* to what we succeed or fail at in life. We recognize there is a difference between **who we are, and what we do**, and that worth or value in the world is not contingent on succeeding or failing. Now that's not to say that we don't give 100% to all we do....we both hold the belief that whatever we do in life we must give our best to. But the separation occurs in that our value and worth, our identity, is not conditional upon how successful or not, we might be in the roles or functions we perform. We hold value in the belief that it's important to grasp opportunities despite fears that might arise, and because there is a separation between worth and failing, we're not frozen by fear and can grasp those opportunities when they come.

Having said that Anne, I fully understand how it gets really hard to keep that separation there when we're talking about the roles we play in life, like our roles as parents, or as ministers. We attach such deep meaning to these roles, not just in the church but across society. The value and worth we place on the role determines the depth of how we 'feel' about our performance in that role. There were times as a younger parent that I felt I was failing in my role because my children were not living up to the expectations I had of them, and because I was the one guiding them it must have been my fault. So I did a good job, I succeeded, at making myself feel really insufficient as a mother at times. The most valuable thing I've learned about my roles as a minister and as a mother, is that they are roles I play, they are not **me**. So when I get it wrong sometimes, it's not "me" that is diminished. The thing about the word 'failing' that I now know is that it's a verb. It's a 'doing word' by definition. So if we can keep the separation between what we DO and who we ARE, separate, then we've got a good chance of not whipping ourselves into a pit of worthlessness or fear.

Anne: Why do you think some people manage to separate the two and other people find it as part of their identity? Why is it there are two different ways?

Leigh: I think some of it is just about our DNA and genes Anne, but much of it is about conditioning – both from broader society and from within the family unit. Science and psychology inform us tremendously today around how we take in information - how we filter it, delete certain parts of it, how it gets replayed over and over in our bodies as a response to the thoughts that go on in our brain and then how we express it back out into the world. So for example, those of us who are baby boomers might remember being parented by our parents quite differently than the way we parented our kids, and likewise how our kids are parenting their kids. Culturally, there are many different things going on. When my parents were children and teens, they were living through a world war, and post that, not only were their families poor, but the nation was rebuilding.

Food was scarce, supplies were scarce, jobs were scarce, therefore money was scarce. My mum tells me stories of being severely disciplined back then if you'd have broken something around the house, or failed at doing a task well because it meant more hardship for the entire family. The consequence of your actions was really high. And we also didn't know the psychological consequences of attaching a task to the esteem of the child back then, so any behaviour or action, good or bad, was linked directly to whether or not you were a good person or a bad person. As our parents then became parents, the cycle was repeated, not necessarily in its entirety, because their own life lessons were teaching them things and breaking down some of those learned beliefs.... but certainly in part. Today, children don't get scolded for breaking things or not doing chores perfectly the first time, partly because the meaning placed upon those **something's** is no longer what it used to be, but as well as that, the advancement of psychology has educated us around the outcomes of linking a child's actions to their esteem. We know the more aware and intentional we are in creating a separation between our child's **doing**, and their **being or identity**, the better off they will be.

So coming back to risking and failing, if we've been parented like my parents were, it's understandable that risk taking behaviours would be less common, because the past experiences continue to be the reference point for present and future ones. That is; failed actions equals over responsibility and overwhelm, feelings of inadequacy, fear of feeling those same feelings again; end result, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and cautious behaviours.

Even though I think as a society in Australia and other western cultures, we're doing much better in our parenting, I'm not convinced that we offer ourselves as adults the same opportunity as we do our children when it comes to failing. As I've watched my grandbabies learn how to walk, I've often observed how those watching the same thing as me, cheer on the little one with each stage of their new learning. Think about it....we all expect that our kids will walk right? Unless there is some physical reason that informs us otherwise. So another expectation exists as well; that is, that they won't just wake up one morning, stand and walk automatically. We realistically expect that it will happen in stages. First they'll crawl, then begin pulling themselves up and using furniture as their supports as they begin to strengthen muscles, find their balance, etc. Then they start to move around the room using the furniture, and developing other skills like looking in another direction while they shuffle along, without falling over. Then there might be a gap in between two pieces of furniture and they build up the courage to let go of one piece, take a step and grab the next piece, and so on, until they then stand and balance without holding onto anything, and then with encouragement and confidence, they walk by themselves without support, into the embrace loving arms. And on the journey goes. All the while those around watching,

being present to the child, taking delight and feeling joy and excitement in the development of this child they love, not judging, just supporting and being there in case they fall to offer love to the child. Yet when it comes to us as adults, I don't always see us offering ourselves, nor offering those who we are in community with, the same love and space to learn new skills that further our development or the evolution of our community. Could you imagine if we did?

Anne: I'm excited about enhancing a church environment that is more nurturing and encouraging. One where that kind of atmosphere was in the forefront of our minds. Would you call it holding space for each other or is that something different?

Leigh: Yeah, I think it is about holding space, and it's about encouragement, but they're two different things. In a counselling space whether that be a formal or informal one, holding space is about providing an environment where we personally hold no agenda of our own; it's a space where we see when our ego pops up and we tell it to "it down" and we rise above it; where we are able to shift our perspective to listen and be informed by not just the other person's perspective but also from a third person position, as well as take into consideration systemic influences on the situation. The consequences of holding space are very much internal ones for the person, where confidence is naturally built within them as they become aware of who they are in that moment, and they find ways to become more resilient through their own transformation. It's a space of almost emptiness, no judgement, no encouragement, just trust, that's all. Trust that I'm ok in this moment and that the universe, God, the Spirit or those present will have my back if I need it. There certainly is a place for encouragement though as we live in community. Not everyone knows how to hold space for another, but lots of us are good at encouraging others to trust in themselves. Others having trust in us helps in that process of beginning to trust in ourselves. I think one of the greatest gifts though that comes from holding space for another person is that as space is held sacredly and without judgement, a person is free to let go of anything that is taking up space, emptying that space allowing for the "coming in" of possibility. The opportunity to take risk then presents itself; we attempt, we fail, we succeed, knowing that in that learning, WE are not diminished; we begin to understand that our ideas, thoughts, beliefs, frameworks that we all have programmed into ourselves, are not us. They are just thoughts and ideas that we've held, and at one point in our life worked for us, now maybe they don't, so we can let go of them without losing our identity.

Anne: As you are talking, I'm thinking we allow children the capacity to grow. We have that expectation that they are growing or that they are changing. Do you think that we could allow that same

attitude of growth towards each other as adults, giving room to that sense of 'we are all on a journey'?

Leigh: Yes, and I think that comes from defining ourselves or others as being static in any stage of evolution. Wouldn't it be great if we saw ourselves as children, as Jesus encouraged us to, meaning that we have lots to learn, let's live in the moment, let's not worry about things to the point where we get so scared that we don't try anything new. You know, I don't see babies being concerned about how they look or how many times they fall when they learn something new; they're not even aware that someone else might be judging them in that learning. Yet we tend to fall into that habit of judging both ourselves and others don't we?

Anne: That's really interesting isn't it? If we found real practical ways to be a people who were able to hold that space for each other how do you think that would strengthen our community?

Leigh: Oh, I would see the possibilities would be enormous. Can you imagine, if in our faith community we could hold such a space, where all fear of judgement is erased, where we detach the way we **do** church from the definition of **who we are** as a people, how freeing that would be?

If we're free to change our minds again about how we "live out" the idea of being the peaceable kingdom? We've done it before, and yes, let's acknowledge that there was pain associated with those times, but we could decide to not to allow that pain from the past to determine our expression of ourselves in the present moment or future moments? We'd actually become MORE of who we are, rather than feel like we're *losing* something of who we are. This is true for us as individuals, why not as a community? This is why holding space for each other is a vital part of our transformation.....in that sacred emptiness, we learn to trust in ourselves, those around us, and the life that connects us; we rediscover that sense of excitement as we experience something new, and find delight in the unknown, knowing all the while that we are stepping into the loving arms of our Creator.

Anne: What a wonderful vision of community; to be consciously generous without judgement, without expectation, to show support as you say by holding space for each other and moving from that attitude of sacred emptiness. Thanks Leigh for helping us to visualise a new community living out the possibilities with each other and with God.