



PURSUIT OF PEACE

by Rick Sarre

Why am I a Christian?

There is a simple answer. The philosopher John Stuart Mill identified it a century ago. It is because I was born into a Christian family in a Christian country in a Christian century. Had I been born in Thailand to a Buddhist family, I would probably be a Buddhist.

So the more pertinent question is: why am I still a Christian? And why do I remain a faithful churchgoer to our particular denomination? The answers to these questions are just as simple: it is because my life was built on the firm Christian foundations that my family laid for me all those years ago, and because of the strength and affirmations that I continue to receive from those who journey along this particular denominational path with me today.

In thinking further about this, I can identify seven key 'tenets' that underpin my current commitment to the Community of Christ. (By happy coincidence, the number 7, according to Judaic law, is the divine number of completion!) I was thinking about using the word 'imperative' rather than 'tenet', but I think there's a little more openness in 'tenet' and a little too much obligation in 'imperative.' Religiosity should never emerge from a sense of obligation. It is born from being open to whatever may be possible.

What are these seven 'tenets'?

It is no coincidence that the story best known in the New Testament is the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is the story of a traveller who responded to the distress of a total stranger (a Jew), someone who would normally have been reviled by Samaritans. Jesus said this is the calling that he asked of his followers: to care for everyone. This fundamental Christian ethos has never left me.

Tenet number one: look out for others even if you know nothing about them.

When you are a member of a small Christian group, you are quickly drawn to the conclusion that other minority groups deserve respect because they, too, are not mainstream. I have thus always respected all other religious persuasions and look out for those persons who may be marginalised for their faith, or lack of faith.

Tenet number two: glean wisdom from others pursuing their own religious quests.

I remember the liberation I felt when tackling my first theological classes at Graceland College (now University) over forty years ago. Here I was introduced to the work of Rudolf Bultmann, best known for his desire to 'demythologise' the New Testament; that is, to reinterpret the essential message of its various writers by asserting that miraculous happenings are best understood in mythical, not literal, terms. The stories do not lose any power thereby; indeed, the lessons become clearer.

Tenet number three: read widely to develop your own religious insights.

Do you know the universe is so vast that it would take a million light years just to exit our galaxy? In fact, the universe is 93 billion light years across and expanding. How does one comprehend that? The great theologian Paul Tillich, when thinking on the mystery of our existence, challenged us to have the 'courage to be' despite life's deep uncertainties.

Tenet number four: be open to wonder; celebrate the awe; proclaim the mystery; don't try to explain it.

As a child of 8, I made a naïve choice to join the church. While both the church and I are very different from where we were in 1963, we have changed together. I have been taught (wisely) to examine constantly what I affirm in the years since my baptism.

Tenet number five: remain steadfast even if honest appraisals sometimes produce uncomfortable results.

In the world today there are too many poor, anxious, alienated, disenfranchised and homeless people. We need to remember that everyone is welcome at the Lord's table; especially the outcast, the lonely, the bereaved and the troubled. As Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments, and in return, I promise that a new spirit will enter your lives; a spirit of truth, and grace and peace."

Tenet number six: be compassionate; seek to expand the overall level of kindness in the world.

Peace is the underpinning of our movement. Joseph Smith III cemented this idea and the new church seal affirmed it. 147 years later (in 2007) we were called upon to expand the idea of peace by challenging "cultural, political and religious trends that are contrary to the reconciling and restoring purposes of God" (Doctrine and Covenants 163:3b). That is, peace is not just the absence of conflict. It requires a commitment to bring about right relationships between all people on and for the earth. In its quest for peace, the church reminds us of the importance of justice, reconciliation, well-being, wholeness, the inalienable worth of all persons and the sacredness of creation.

Tenet number seven: be a person of peace.

A reflection on peace

Let me expand upon this last tenet. In 1974 when I was 19 years old, word came to us in Adelaide that Community of Christ World Conference had confirmed the revelation from President W Wallace Smith that was now to be referred to as Doctrine and Covenants 151. The last few paragraphs read as follows:

"You who are my disciples must be found continuing in the forefront of those organizations and movements which are recognizing the worth of persons and are committed to bringing the ministry of my Son to bear on their lives. Working together to this end will promote unity, resolve conflicts, relieve tensions between individuals, and heal the wounds which have been sapping the strength of the church, spiritually and materially. This you must do in the spirit of love and compassion as revealed in my Son during his journey in your midst."

Here we are some 47 years later, and the words are just as powerful, and the call just as relevant, if not more so, today. I try to live by this challenge each day. I am reminded of the words of the Rev Martin Luther King in 1968 (paraphrasing a portion of a sermon delivered in 1853 by the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker) when he asserted that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." While I try to remain on that trajectory, I know that I am in good company.

The Peace and Justice Team

Since the 2019 World Conference I have had the privilege of chairing the Peace and Justice Team for the World Church. There are twelve of us in this Team (6 men and 6 women aged from 18 to 80), and located in 6 countries (USA, Canada, Nigeria, Australia, England and Belgium). Our key tasks at the moment include shaping the Statement on Non-Violence to be presented to the 2023 World Conference, putting up for selection the next recipient(s) of the church's International Peace Award, fashioning a church position on the Israel/Palestine peace process, liaising with global peace groups, preparing peace colloquies in multiple jurisdictions, and writing materials for reunions and other study settings. It is a busy schedule.

Conclusion

Let me end with a thought that Bob Mesle, professor of theology at Graceland College, inspired me with many years ago. 'We can think there is no ultimate 'otherness' and that the world is actually just an accidental lump of uncaring matter, where hunger, need and suffering are the norm. Or we can affirm that there is an inexhaustible well of gracious love from which we may all drink and be renewed, and that this 'wellspring' is sourced from a power outside of ourselves from which all love and life emanates.'

I have chosen this latter course because it best explains the meaning of our existence.