

MODERNISING MICAH - THE IMPACT OF RESEACH ON SOCIAL JUSTICE

When Peter Matheson asked me last year to speak to this august group on the impact of research on social policy I was happy to accept and it set me thinking on the wider context, hence my title 'Modernising Micah'. This Old Testament Prophet is described as the voice of the village peasant against the rapacious power of the state.

Do we have a prophetic role in the 21st century.

Prophet Rabbi Abraham Heschel said:

"Prophets remind us that insight is a breakthrough requiring much intellectual dismantling and dislocation if we are to renew our sense of vision and deepen our understanding of our shared humanity".

Our research contributes to that insight.

It might be a bit grand to suggest that the work we do is the modern day Micah but we are motivated by the same love and humility and endeavour to provide that insight into the struggles of those we serve. The Church and those of us in church agencies have a critical responsibility as Walter puts it.....

'The prophet is the one who, by use of [hopeful language] contradicts the presumed world of kings, showing both that the presumed world does not square with the facts and that we taught a lie and have believed it because the people with the hardware and the printing press told us it was that way. And so the offering of symbols [the offering of new language and newer questions] is a job not for a timid clerk who simply shares the inventory but for people who know something different and are prepared, out of their own anguish and amazement, to know that the close world of managed reality is false'¹.

A bit about Micah:

¹ Walter Brueggemann, 2001, The Prophetic Imagination, p64

Micah condemns the leaders of Israel and Judah for their lack of justice, their cruelty to follow man, and their prideful arrogance. Their heart attitude was the exact opposite of what God required. Micah calls for change.

As a modern day Micah,

What we are wanting to do is debunk the power of 'unreasonableness that lies underneath and is determinative of social policy' as Brueggemann's words.²

So that addresses the 'why'.

Now to the what and the how.

What is social justice?

Dr Myron Friesen recently teamed up with the Maxim Institute to investigate NZ perspectives on social justice.

This study concluded that the basic principles of social justice include:

equality tolerance compassion fairness and participation

It also considered the benefits of a government led centralised approach

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where society provides for social justice via legislation, opportunities, education or provision of resources which would lead to greater civic participation and personal fulfilment.

Alternatively a more decentralised approach is described as when what is important in peoples lives is something outside themselves and society at large is healthier. The poorest and weakest members of society are looked after not by a few or by a government organisation, but by the people around them.

² Walter Brueggemann, 1986, To Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly, An Agenda for Ministers, p9

The survey asked 'how can an individual promote social justice' which rendered the greatest consensus with the following emphasis.

Firstly to participate, volunteer, get involved in the community/society you live in.

To talk about it, be vocal, protest, write letters, discuss social justice with family, friends and neighbours.

To treat others as you would like to be treated

And finally to get educated and informed about social justice issues³

Presbyterian Support Otago makes the assumption that it is the role of society to provide for social justice through the government structure but also through individual responsibility and understanding so we undertake research based on the coalface perspective of our clients and attempt to tell their story. There is power in the narrative, particularly if it is backed up with empirical data. It speaks to policy makers and the public alike.

Some years ago Charles Waldegrave was the guest speaker at our Annual General Meeting and he challenged us that, focusing on social service delivery alone is not enough. Unless we question why those services are needed in the first place we become part of an industry supporting an injustice.

That struck a chord and prompted Presbyterian Support Otago's action research journey.

Back in 2000 I visited the Presbyterian Church Washington office in the United States and discovered a very well oiled government lobby, from regular publications through to seminars on how to lobby your local senator. The Church of Scotland's Board of Social Responsibility had a rather different approach developing significant publications on key issues such as abortion and euthanasia among others.

³ Myron, Friesen, Perceptions of Social Justice in NZ in Pursuing Social Justice in NZ, p 157

Presbyterian Support needed to carve out something uniquely New Zealand that was relevant and affordable.

Thus the role of Community Mission Director was established in Otago and along with it our research capacity in Rev Dennis Povey in 2001.

So what have we done over the last 8 years?

Poverty, or more particularly income inadequacy, was a key feature in our day to day work with clients and that was the focus of the first study published in “How Much is Enough” in 2002.

We updated key aspects of that study in 2003 and in particular using the Minimum Adequate Expenditure Budget methodology that had been developed by Charles Waldegrave. This seeks to develop the core elements of a minimum budget using input from welfare clients qualifying and quantifying the essentials and overall basic expenditure and then looking at the gap between that and income.

Prompted by the fact that housing/accommodation took up to 50% of our client's income we turned our attention to a study into housing issues for low income families producing ‘Old, Cold and Costly’ in 2004. As the title suggests the findings showed a grim reality of poor housing in the cooler part of the country with the oldest building stock per head of population of any city in NZ.

Lack of insulation was identified as a major problem that is gradually being attended to via the various government initiatives. But sadly it is not quick enough and not necessarily for those that need it most, low income renters.

The next area of focus was a complete change of tack, based on another area of Presbyterian Support Otago's work – Older People.

Having established an acceptable standard of housing for low income families, we translated those principles into assessing suitability for older people to ‘age

in place' using our home support client base and produced 'With my Boots On'. The title reflects exactly what these clients told us. They were by and large living in suitable accommodation and were determined to stay there and be carried out with their boots on! But the study revealed a potential problem into the future for people to age in place in suitable accommodation.

The latest study titled 'Can We Do Better' and designed to update the previous poverty work, was timed to spark debate prior to the last election and be used to inform an incoming government. We co-hosted pre-election forums at Knox and First Church and candidates were asked to speak to the issues of poverty identified in the study as part of their presentation.

The key feature of each piece of action research includes both the quantitative and qualitative material based on

- interviews with clients
- relevant statistics
- content provided and literature search
- use of established credible research tools and methodology
- telling personal stories
- making recommendations

With each study we have utilised in-house researchers and writers but had expert advice and supervision from key people within the tertiary institutions. The combined approach of qualitative and quantitative has created its own dynamic as experts from different disciplines bring their perspective to the table!

So what have we achieved?

We know that documenting real life issues through client stories and statistics opens doors in the halls of power in local and central government. Those stories and statistics have been heard.

Similarly, the publications have been well utilised in University studies and Polytechnics and we are still getting requests to supply tertiary institutions and

individual students. They have also provided a credible platform to speak to a range of groups in church settings, service clubs, schools, public forums, etc.

I have been somewhat surprised by the lack of awareness of the issues when speaking to various groups.....At the request of the DCC I spoke on behalf of the sector at a city leader's forum last year and provided some of the findings from our last study and several people came up to me in the break amazed at the level of deprivation in our community.

Awareness and in some instances compassion are sadly lacking...some are all too quick to tell you that these people need to get out to work or dig a vegetable garden... stop smoking and, yes, use of disposable nappies is such an unnecessary expense.

You know if the solution was that simple we wouldn't have a problem!
The Equality Trust in the UK has been very successful in promoting the research done by Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson. published in the SPIRIT LEVEL. This identifies that the health and wellbeing of any society is affected by the relative gap between the rich and the poor of that society.

New Zealand does not fair well in those statistics – at the bottom three in the developed world along with the UK and USA.

We know that Governments are persuaded by popular opinion – that's how they stay in power. Indeed Wilkinson and Pickett concede that in fact 'governments have usually not pursued more egalitarian policies until they thought their survival depended on it'⁴

The issues need to be kept before the public.

⁴ Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, The Spirit Level, 2010, p 241

We don't do that alone. Since we took up this challenge, the Salvation Army have established a Parliamentary and Social Policy Unit.

The New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services have continued to undertake very worthwhile research that we contribute to.

The Child Poverty Action Group have been more vociferous in their work.

The Children's Commission and the Families Commission have been established and engage in research.

Other regions of Presbyterian Support have looked at particular issues in their communities including youth anger and the social needs of the frail elderly. Presbyterian Support Northern has just established a research unit called Impact Research that other regions of Presbyterian Support will utilise and contribute to.

There has been some internal benefits to engaging in research and more particularly expanding the collection/capture of data that comes from our service delivery.

So what specific things have occurred in the policy or practice setting in line with our recommendations?

Influence on certain local council policies is evident in the retention of the DCC Electricity Fund despite some Councillors' opposition, the extension of the Cosy Homes project to include low income rentals has occurred to a small extent in the PHO environment.

The recent accommodation standard, being adopted by the University and Dunedin City Council for student accommodation was sparked in part by the standard developed in 'Old, Cold and Costly', that OUSA trialled in the year following that publication. Over time that voluntary standard will hopefully impact on landlords of other rental accommodation in Dunedin.

The Working for Families package was specifically in response to the issue of children in poverty that a number of groups had lobbied on, however it failed to extend to beneficiaries.

There is a gradual acceptance that social inclusion is an important indicator in a healthy society. Local governments have been charged with that broader role but it is so broad and fails to deal with the marginalised in our society and doesn't even pay lip service to the real issues.

If we were to measure the impact of research on social justice, using Myron Friesen's principles of equality, tolerance, compassion, fairness and participation, it is clear to me our work is not yet done!

If we return to the model of Micah to "do justice" Walter defines that as "sorting out what belongs to whom and return it to them".

He suggests that if we control what belongs to others we come to think of it as rightly ours.

So the work of liberation, redemption, salvation is the work of giving things back.⁵

In our work with people in poverty that is what we endeavour to do. Give them back control.

The research that we have undertaken has sought to challenge those in Government Departments who have "control" and those in our society that hold control by way of their attitude.

Brueggemann identifies Micah's justice having two elements

Firstly 'a firm clear critique of what is going on

And secondly a poetic scenario of an alternative way'⁶

⁵ Walter , Voices in the Night, p1

⁶ ibid, p5

As a modern day Micah we need to advance that prophetic alternative more boldly. The peace Micah envisages in chapter 4 requires a shift of economic priorities which permits the end of greed, the end of rapacious taxes, the end of exploitation either by strong parties or by ruthless governments.

We have lived for some years now with the two main political parties and successive governments holding a place in the centre of the political divide albeit slightly to the right of the left with very little attention paid to improving the lot of the disadvantaged in our society.

The last government budget was framed as “fair” ... but Fair to whom? ... consistent maybe but some will be significantly better off than others and it does nothing to address the widening gap between the rich and the poor.

When we speak to politicians and policy makers what is wanted is not only rhetoric and vision but what they are seeking is the practical policy solutions as well which we are happy to participate in the development of but surely this is a key role of the myriad of policy advisors and analysts. True consultative approach would be welcomed.

However it seems to me that we have been operating to some degree in a moral vacuum where the counter voices speak of have been largely silent and left us to do it for them. The public questions capacity of the national church has been almost obliterated. If we look at our visionary forebears such as Rev Rutherford Waddell who preached a sermon on the sin of cheapness these people made a significant impression.

Our first labour laws were established following Waddell's exposure of seamstresses in the sweat shops in Dunedin. This bold leadership is still needed and there is a place for that beyond the social service agency that has contracts with the crown like ourselves.

Adequate support for the frail elderly in their own homes is a topical issue right now and DHBs all round the country seek to withdraw from provision of what

for some is very necessary domestic assistance. Being outspoken about the way in which our local DHB is dealing with the issue earned me a rebuke from their CEO.

Being outspoken as a service provider brings with it some risks.

The Church leaders can and do play an important role in adding to the debate informed by their service arm but sufficiently separate. New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services plays a role in informing the church leaders prior to their forum with the Prime Minister twice a year. Presbyterian Support contributes to that.

Having spent a day with a group of academics from various disciplines and policy people on the topic of Inequality, hosted by the University of Otago Centre for Public Issues & Theology, I am convinced that there is a broad approach needed that considers the solution as a package rather than a piecemeal/flavour of the month model. If we thought that the global financial crisis was going to produce a new order we'll be disappointed as everyone is already moving on. But the coal face struggles for people have not improved and in many ways have just got harder with little hope of better things to come.

The future Focus Social Assistance Bill has the potential to take us back to the beneficiary bashing days and the suggestion that if you haven't got a job it is your own fault. We know that unemployment continues to rise, particularly for the younger age group. Sceptics like me wonder if this is clever PR to deflect the problem onto the beneficiaries and away from the govt ... but I digress!

Presbyterian Support will contribute to a broader vision by continuing to speak out for the disadvantaged through our action research. As I have thought more on the prophetic approach, providing a bold alternative needs more emphasis as we go forward. We need to promote public debate about the kind of society we want to create and what needs to happen to achieve it. Micah challenges us to not do justly but also to love mercy and walk humbly with our God. This is the challenge to us all and Mod Micah signing off.