

St John's Uniting, Mount Waverley

A talk to the Fellowship on 25th July 2010.

Thank you for your welcome and your hospitality to me and Judy. We know we're among friends.

As the notice for the meeting said, I plan to talk on the topic of "Confessions of a Doubting Leader." For people who have worked with me, the title might seem a bit strange. Because most people see me as a pretty confident person. I come across that way. Confident.

But I knew from an early age that confidence is a dangerous character trait. My grandmother, my father's mother, was one of the most confident and certain people I knew. She infected her three boys and one girl with her confidence. My Dad, and my Aunt and Uncles, were confident people. But it was my aunt who said with marvellous self-insight, "We are often wrong, but never in doubt."

And, when it comes to charting my course through life, I have to admit to being often wrong, but, on the other hand, never in doubt.

And that has to do with how I see God working things out for me, and for Judy and for our family. And, also, how God works things out for the organisations I have worked with over the years.

On the way I've often been wrong. Made wrong choices. Took the wrong turn somewhere. But God is faithful for those who trust him. About that, I don't think I have ever had a doubt. So, I've been often wrong, but never in doubt.

Somewhere along the journey, I was told the four spiritual laws. I must say I am not really a fan of trying to synthesise the mind of God down into 4 simple statements. But the laws are true, insofar as they go. And the first spiritual law, so I was told is, that God loves me and offers a wonderful plan for my life.

I think I believed that from the cradle, because I was born into a Christian home. With parents who were active in the church. My Dad was Sunday School Superintendent in the days when Sunday School was called Sunday School. And my Mum was regularly seen at the piano or harmonium in worship services. I was lucky to know about Jesus from the cradle.

So it was easy for me to accept that God did love me, and that he had a wonderful plan for my life.

Only one problem. Finding out what that plan was!

Did any of you, when you were 15, know exactly how your life was going to turn out?

I remember going to a Vocational Guidance Counsellor in my High School and he looked at my tests and said, "Well, you could pretty much do anything you want to."

Now that's seriously dumb advice to give to a 15 year old boy. "Do anything you want to." At 15 I didn't have enough sense to translate this advice into a focussed study program. Instead I bought a guitar and went folk singing. Instead of studying Chemistry I studied chords. And when people asked me what I would do when I left school I told them I was planning on doing medicine. Of course, I was planning to do medicine without planning to pass any of the requisite Year 12 subjects.

It seemed to me that I had made some wrong choices. I guess I could have said that God had got it wrong, but by the time I was 18 or 19 I had worked out that having confidence in God's plan and finding out what it was might be two different activities.

You see, I think God had in mind that I should develop the gifts he had given me in the areas of communications and leadership. At 18 I was not yet an effective communicator. Nor was I an

especially good leader. But I had been given opportunities already to develop these gifts within the church, particularly in MYF and the Methodist Camping program.

Maybe it's a bit simplistic, but I suspect God didn't want me to be a doctor. I mean, even today, I can't watch those medical programs on TV without reaching for a bucket.

So, for my self-protection, and so that God could do with me what he had in mind all along, my academic career made a few false starts. I drifted into the NAB, although in those less abbreviated times we called it the National Bank. I quite enjoyed being a bank clerk, but my weekends were busy with folk music and compering.

Folk Music had some special attractions that had little to do with the three-chord songs. For example, there was this really cute girl from the south side of Brisbane who sang with her brothers. I invited her to do a gig with my folk trio on the Gold Coast at one of the discos that the church was running over the summer holidays. Pretty soon I realised I was in love with her. And I still am.

You see there might not be such a person as Cupid, but there is a God who has a plan.

While Judy and I were talking about getting married, God was doing something else in the background that he knew was important for where he wanted us to go.

In the course of being involved in a "Youth Spectacular" at Brisbane's Festival Hall, I came into contact with the manager of one of Brisbane's radio stations, George Lovejoy. George asked me if I had ever thought of going radio announcing. Had I ever? When I was 10 I used to tape record a 19 year old radio announcer named John Laws and copy his inflections!

Long story short, I got a job on the Sunshine Coast at Radio 4NA Nambour. I started on Judy's birthday in April and we moved the wedding up to September so I wouldn't starve to death from my own cooking. Obviously God did not have in his plan any appearances for me on MasterChef.

So now I was 20 years of age and working on the wireless. And I knew, somewhere deep inside, that this was the perfect fit I had been looking for. I felt I had found God's plan. Or at least this part of it.

And what a wonderful series of amazing coincidences from that Vocational Guidance Counsellor all the way to the Sunshine Coast. But were they coincidences?

At so many points in my working life it seems clear to me that a power greater than I has been guiding, or pushing, or impeding. There have been so many surprises. So many coincidences.

A former colleague of mine at World Vision, the late Dr Malcolm Mackay, wrote a book titled "More Than Coincidence." I can point to many coincidences in my life. You can call them coincidences, if you like. I believe they are signs of God at work. Why? Because there are too many of them. Too many coincidences for it to be a coincidence.

Well, radio took me and Judy to Cairns for a year. We bought a caravan and lived with the tourists. Judy took up work as a legal secretary as she had done on the Sunshine Coast, and, as you did at small country radio stations, I learned everything there was to learn about every aspect of the business. I serviced clients. Wrote copy for ads. Selected music. Went on OBs (outside broadcasts). Did sports commentary at the national track cycling championships. Broadcast descriptions of the Queen's visit to Cairns on HMS Britannia. And, of course, told the time, read ads, and back announced hundreds of records.

This did seem to be in God's plan. But where was it leading? Was I going to have a lifelong career as a DJ?

In the short term it took us back to Brisbane and I hosted the afternoon program on 4BK for about five years. But something else was going on. I was looking for something more than time calls and sound bites.

Looking back I can see that I was looking for some way to put some structure around all the disparate experiences of the previous decade. In other words, what was the theoretical framework that made sense of music, radio, writing, advertising, and so on.

Luckily, some might say, the University of Queensland was about to start a Journalism degree. My Year 12 results were inadequate for Medicine, but they would get me into Arts with only one hitch. In those days you needed a Year 12 qualification in a foreign language to do Arts. But there was one loop-hole. If you did a 1st year language unit, they would forgo the requirement.

Now here was another coincidence. I had done both French and German up to Year 10. But since being in Brisbane, I had co-hosted a German language radio program. I was the English speaking host, and a University of Queensland lecturer in German was the German speaking host. Naturally, even though most of what I had to read was in English, there were plenty of German words to pronounce and quite a lot to listen to. By the time I enrolled at Uni, my German pronunciation was good enough to imply a greater facility in the language than I actually had.

Of course, I enrolled and discovered that University level German is unbelievable difficult, ungläublich schwierig. I had forgotten most of the grammar. Got my Datives and Accusatives mixed up. Said Der when I should have said Die. Und so weiter.

I scraped through the written tests and then came the oral exam which was worth 25% of the mark. But I had a friend in court. The German lecturer co-host. Who, it turned out, was the examiner. He proceeded to ask me questions about topics that had all been part of our weekly radio show. Amazingly I knew most of the answers. My grammar betrayed me, but I guess I sounded just sufficiently German to scrape through.

How good is God to put those disparate things together, eh?

Who would have thought that co-hosting a radio program would be training for passing an exam I hadn't even known I was going to sit for?

And there's another lovely sequel to this. You see, almost thirty years later I was surprised to be offered a job that required us to live in Vienna. And what language do people speak in Vienna? Although I hasten to add that 30 years of no-practice German had left me pretty rusty. But at least I was better off than if we'd gone to Paris. Or, for that matter, Moscow.

And so, I settled down to my studies, and my radio program, and Judy resigned her job as a legal secretary to be a full-time Mum to our two kids, Jamie and Melanie. The same two kids who had the good fortune a few years later to go to a school where the principal was a fellow named Murray Landt.

There's even a story about God's provision and planning in how we came to have two kids (and later a third, but maybe I'll save that one). Judy always wanted to have babies. And, like most married people, we had worked out how that happens. But nothing was actually happening in the pregnancy zone. We did the usual tests. But still no luck. Surely God wasn't going to leave us childless.

One day I was doing the panel for a talkback show with Lady Cilento. She was talking about adoption and I thought it sounded like a pretty good idea. Judy and I talked about it and she liked the idea a WHOLE LOT. So we got the papers. Signed up. And, nine months later, how cute is that timing, eh, we got a call that a baby boy had arrived with our name on him.

Within days of Jamie coming home, guess who was pregnant?

Jamie came home in April. Melanie came into the world the next January.

What a nice set of coincidences, eh? You see, there is a God.

...

After a few years I had completed my Journalism degree and ambition and boredom had me looking around for something else. A few possibilities came and went in radio, and then I saw an ad in the trade magazine, B&T Weekly. Positions Vacant. It was an ad for a Communications Officer at some organisation called World Vision. As it happened I had only just heard of World Vision a few weeks before when they ran the first 40 Hour Famine in Queensland, but I knew nothing about them. World Vision wasn't yet a household word in 1976.

Have you ever had the experience of reading a job ad and seeing it match your own resume? Well, I took this ad home to Judy and we agreed that they seemed to be looking for me. So I applied. They flew me to Melbourne. I got the job. And Judy and I and the kids moved to Boronia just in time to see Hawthorn win the Grand Final.

And so began a 24 year journey with World Vision. God was preparing to expose me to a new way of thinking and feeling about the world. And he was doing it by a route that I didn't see at the time.

You see, I joined World Vision for what might appear the wrong reasons. I mean you join World Vision to help the poor, right? Or because an angel spoke to you in the night and said "Go and save my people in darkest Africa."

Well it wasn't like that at all. I went to World Vision to join the team that was trying to turn World Vision into a household word. I was into advertising, communications and fundraising. The poor of the world were my subject matter, that's true. But my interest was in the means of telling their story, rather than the story itself.

But, I reckon this was just how God planned it. Because over the next two and a half decades he kept making sure that I got deeper and deeper into the reasons he wanted World Vision to exist.

I began to understand who the poor were. I met people who were poor. And that blew my stereotypes into tiny pieces. Because poor people are just like you and me. Their circumstances are different, but they hurt and laugh and cry and worry just like every human. After a while the poor were no longer distant. Other cultures were no longer weird. Just different.

I remember Judy and I were taking some American visitors to a show in Melbourne and as we were walking from the car to the theatre, a fire engine came rushing down the street. Now this was 30 years ago. In those days here in Melbourne, fire engines rang a bell unlike today, and they were painted red, just like today.

But in California, where are American couple hailed from, fire engines already had sirens and they were painted yellow.

The American woman with us saw and heard this amazing red thing dinging down the street and exclaimed, "What's THAT?"

We explained it was a fire engine. She looked at it going by and said softly, "Well that's weird."

Her husband said, "Not weird, honey. Just different."

Our time in World Vision taught us many things, but maybe that lesson was the most important. And I thank God for it.

There is much too much stereotyping and blame-the-victim stuff going on in the world today. I am sad and frustrated about the awful way we are treating boat people. Politicians demonise these victims of other people's evil acts, adding victimisation to victimisation. And too many Australians prefer to hold onto the stereotypes than discover these are real people, just like us. Because if we can hold onto the stereotype, we can fool ourselves somehow that these people are different. And therefore they don't matter. Or worse, they deserve what's coming to them. It's a tragedy.

Anyway, back to my story. You can see that working with and for the poor of the world for half my life has had an effect.

We had a number of successes in turning World Vision into a household word in this country. Not the least rolling out the 40 Hour Famine, even onto Neighbours.

After a few years, I had begun to participate in international meetings of the marketing people. I saw that some of the countries in which World Vision worked were becoming rather prosperous. World Vision had started in South Korea. Now South Korea was becoming an Asian tiger. My favourite was Hong Kong. By 1980, Hong Kong was rich and getting richer. A generation had emerged from their refugee parents who knew the history of deprivation and poverty from their parents, but who themselves had hardly experienced it. Surely this was a market ripe for fundraising?

So I began to talk about Hong Kong with colleagues. I found few interested. Then a New Zealander who was working in the International Office said, "You should write a paper on what we should do in Hong Kong. I'll show your paper to the Executive Vice President, and you'll be seen as the expert."

"Really? OK." So I wrote the paper. He put it in front of the EVP and about a month later, the EVP is asking me if I'd like to go to Hong Kong and turn my ideas into reality.

Well, I was flabbergasted. God's plan, not mine. It had never occurred to me that whatever skills I had would work outside of Australia. Even though I worked for an overseas aid agency, I thought the only people who went overseas were doctors and social workers. And here they were asking an Aussie marketer, to go to Hong Kong.

And so we went. We arrived early in 1982 in the dark of a Hong Kong January evening. Judy and the kids had never been to Hong Kong before. We crammed into a taxi, crammed into the traffic, crammed between high rise apartment blocks that disappeared up into the darkness, and drove for an hour to our hotel. Judy thought her life was over. How could we live in a place like this?

Since I had been to Hong Kong before, and had the same claustrophobic experience, I had arranged for us to spend the first few weeks at Repulse Bay. In those days, the Repulse Bay Hotel was still running as a hotel, a beautiful, quaint, colonial remnant that looked out across the China Sea. None of this was visible in the dark.

We piled into our room and went to sleep, with Judy dreaming that terror awaited her for the rest of her days.

In the morning we awoke in paradise. Our room looked out across the beach. A three masted yacht was moored in the bay, framed by the green headlands. There were trees everywhere. Everyone's mood improved, and we set off on our adventure.

It was an adventure we had not planned ourselves. But someone had. And we'd been lucky enough, or just faithful enough to accept the ticket to ride.

There are so many more stories. They'd fill a book. Some of them already have filled one book I wrote in 1995. "Journeys to Justice" was published in 1995 by Harper Collins and it's now well out of print.

But since I move from full-time work to alleged retirement next Thursday, maybe I'll have time to write a sequel.

In short, God led us back to World Vision Australia a few years later and I took up the CEO role for eight exciting years. The years were made even more exciting because I third child made a surprise entry in 1988. Fifteen years after the second child. Another example of God's version of family planning. Or his sense of humour perhaps.

I think Judy and I both thought we had had our overseas experience and that we'd be staying home for the rest of our lives. But then we were surprised by God again.

I was in America discussing organisational changes with the President of World Vision International. He was moving one of his Vice Presidents out of the Middle East and Eastern Europe region.

“Who are going to replace him with?” I asked.

He said, “I thought I’d offer it to you.”

Well, I laughed. I assured him we were quite happy where we were thank you very much. And we left it at that.

Judy reminds me that when I got back she happened to say “If ever you are offered a job in say Geneva or somewhere, I wouldn’t mind another stint overseas.”

And I said, “Funny.” And told her I had been offered the Regional Vice President’s job for the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

“If you took it,” Judy said, “ where would we have to live?”

I told her—Vienna. And she said, “That’d be nice, wouldn’t it?”

The regional office was located in Vienna, because it was the only place then, that you could get a direct flight any day to all of the national offices in the region. These offices stretched from Jerusalem in the South to Moscow in the North.

So we bid farewell to our two adult children and withdrew our eight year old son from Boronia Heights Primary School. Since Murray Landt had by now retired, there was no compelling reason for our son to stay there.

And we had four years in Vienna, brushing up on our German, and discovering that what the Viennese people speak on trams isn’t quite German as you learn it in school. They call it Wienerish and we came to understand the difference very wonderfully, by going to see a German language production of My Fair Lady. When the script called for English to be spoken, the cast spoke High German (the stuff we learnt at school). When the script called for them to speak Cockney, I found myself thinking “That’s what I hear people talking on trams!”

Since I left World Vision in 2000 there have been two further CEO assignments. Neither seemed to fit in any plan of mine, but both were wonderful learning experiences. And very rewarding.

In 2003 I took on an assignment with the Deakin University Student Association. I describe this as my post-modern management experience. I thought it might last six months, and I stayed for five years. I reported to, and alternately mentored, a board of 20 year old student leaders who changed every year and who were all practising to be politicians. Baby politics, we used to call it. It could be frustrating and fun at the same time.

And then, just 3 years ago, my job was done there so I organised my exit strategy, thinking maybe it was time to retire as I was about to turn 60 and I thought future prospects might be limited.

And then, a funny thing happened, another coincidence. I should have been better prepared to be surprised by God implementing his plan.

The week after I gave notice, a former colleague who had moved onto a leadership role in a Catholic agency near the city, got a call from a head hunter. She described the job to him, obviously thinking he might be interested himself. As she described the job, he thought of me.

The Victorian Relief Committee and Foodbank Victoria were two organisations that had recently merged. The merger had not gone real well. Two quite disparate corporate cultures, and no clear leadership. The board wanted to appoint a CEO to create something enduring out of the wreckage of the merger. I took a call from the head hunter and she described the phoenix-like task. It sounded like a match made in Heaven to me. But then, it was a match made in Heaven right?

Now, two and a half years down the track, there’s a new organisation built on the history of the past, but not trapped in that history. For the time being, we call this organisation VicRelief Foodbank out of respect for the two parenting entities. But it is a new organisation. And from next Thursday it

will have a new CEO in place. And I will retire. And wait for God's next surprise. That there will be such a surprise, I have no doubt.

Thank you.