

Under The Kwila Tree In PNG

The Power of Concretisation in Creating Shared Meaning

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Helen is a Mercy sister based in Adelaide. She works mainly with young mums and their children who are homeless. She is an advanced trainee in the Adelaide Psychodrama Training Group.

In 2002 Helen went to Papua New Guinea with Margie Abbott to assist the Mercy community run a major event for their sisters. Known as a 'Chapter' this is in effect an organisational review which elects leadership for the next five years. Here Helen talks to the Journal about her experiences.

Say something about the Mercy community in PNG..

There is a community of up to 40 sisters living in about 8 local groups in various parts of the country such as Wewak, Pt Moresby, Medang and Goroka. They are mostly engaged in different kinds of community development work. This Chapter was held at a conference centre in Goroka in the PNG highlands. About half of the group were Melanesian, the rest were expatriate Australians and the common language was English.

What happened?

We flew to Goroka and were met at the airport with great care. This was an important event in the life of the PNG community. We knew this was a time of transition in the balance between Melanesian and expatriate culture

and leadership in the Mercy group. There was quite a strong 'disturbing motive' in the group wanting a Melanesian woman to be in a significant leadership role. As outsiders and as white Australians we were very sensitive to working respectfully across cultures to assist them to reach the decisions that best suited them.

My memory of the Chapter coalesces around three significant images in the process over the 5 days.

The Boat

At the beginning we introduced ourselves and we had come to listen and help facilitate the meeting. We used the image of embarking on a boat to go on a journey. The group set out the boat and then as each person approached to get on board they spoke about their experience in the moment and their hopes and fears for the journey.

There was sense of excitement in the room. Everybody spoke. The notion of getting on board to create something was meaningful to the entire group. Some spoke about the fear

that as a group they might not be united. This created a strong unifying image early on in the process of the Chapter.

Circles of Power

The next image we used assisted the group warm up to the process of selecting leaders. It was important that everyone could see and understand how power and decision making are shared. In our community some have the right to vote and some do not - depending on how far through their training they are and the stage of their vows. Anyone who's an initiate can stand for office. So there are those who have an active voice and those who can speak but cannot vote have a passive voice

We concretised this by creating circles representing the structure and different positions in the group. The first time we did this in complete silence.

In the inner circle were those who were eligible to stand and be voted for. In the next ring were those who were able to vote and in the outermost ring were those who could participate but could neither vote nor stand for office. As the participants took their place in the circle they brought their chair with them. This was essentially a warm up to the process of voting.

It was also clear that of those sitting in the inner most circle, not all would stand for office. And of those considering it there were huge fears about what it would mean to step out into a leadership role.

Gossip

We then explored the dynamics about someone deciding to stand for office.

"Let's have one person represent a sister who has decided to stand for the leadership team. How about you do that." Auxiliary stands.

"What would be said about such a person? ... What would be the gossip that gets going about them? Let's have two people volunteer to be other eligible sisters talking about it." Two people stand.

"OK could you both stand behind her, because gossip is done behind someone's back.

So here she is. She has announced her intention to stand for leadership, what kind of things would you say and hear?"

Auxiliaries as gossipers improvise a conversation.

"What makes her think she's fit to lead? Is she better than us?"

"Yes I remember her when she arrived"

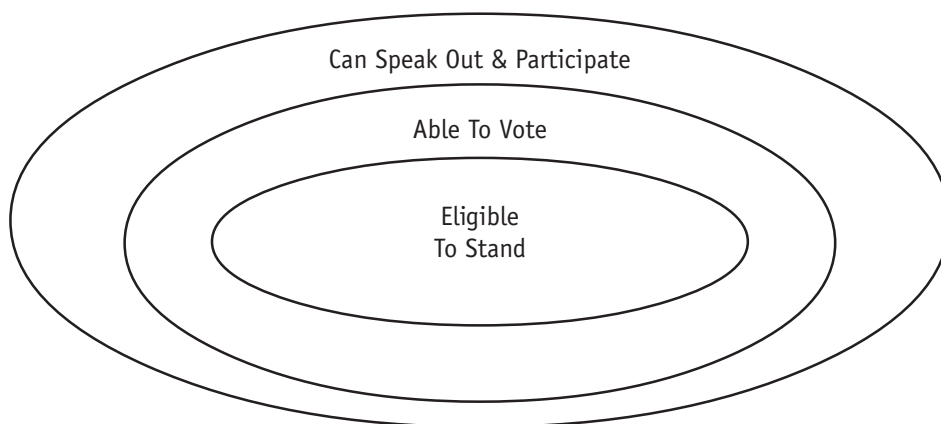


Diagram 1: Circles of Power

The gossip was fully enacted. The group delighted in the truth of it. There was a sense of 'yes, this is how it is'.

We then moved to a consideration of what it is we looked for in a leadership candidate.

This was concretised by a chair in the centre of the circle with a hypothetical person representing the role of the leader. Participants were invited to speak about what characteristics and behaviours they wanted in their leader. The first voices were hesitant.

"I want someone who'll listen to me."

"I want someone who's interested in what I do."

"I'm looking for someone who's honest."

The feeling in the room deepened and the voices grew clearer as people spontaneously spoke out what was important to them. The effect of this concretisation was extraordinarily powerful as it assisted people's warm up to speaking their truth and to the kind of community and leadership that they valued.

The Tree

Every evening the planning group for the Chapter met to reflect on the day, discuss progress and look at the program for the next day. As well as elect the next leadership team the work of the Chapter itself involved considering questions such as: What are our issues? Where do we want to go? The answers would come out of people's passions and commitment.

One night the planning group decided they needed a tree. Not just any tree but a Kwila tree - a huge native hardwood with an immense canopy.

The next morning we simply set out the Kwila tree. Participants brought out what such a tree would have: deep roots, a very strong trunk, big canopy, plenty of fresh air, no termites. The

group kept building the tree - lots of birds and little animals sheltering, feeding - parts interacting with each other, talking, moving, bringing water and nutrients up, expanding the life in and around the tree.

Slowly the tree started to turn into a picture of our community.

"Well this is like us - lots of conversation with each other, interacting within the metaphor of the tree."

"Yes these are our deep roots in the communities we live among."

"And there are the people who came and started our group many years ago."

The full image of the tree as community came alive. The branches reaching out into the world began to speak.

"We need to go back to the remote villages and live there."

"We need to work with the people with AIDS."

"Yes that's very important."

The expression was totally group centred with a lively feeling and a buzz of excitement. In all, six directions emerged which we captured as part of our planning for the future.

The concretisation of the tree triggered an amazing sense of group involvement in creating something together. The action and expression built a common language of strength, connection, beauty, abundance and direction.

What else happened at the Chapter?

Life at the Chapter had its own rhythm. There was an evening concert at the end of each day. Before the evening meal there was a liturgy prepared by one of the local community groups, for example, a dedication to our sense of place of birth and the land sung in traditional language.

Why did they invite you to assist them?

I had previously worked with this existing leadership group when they had first been elected. This was for two days of team building as leaders. So I was already linked with them. Several years later I had facilitated the meditation retreat and workshop held at Christmas time. Some of the women on that Christmas retreat were on the planning group for the Chapter and they invited me to assist. I knew I didn't want to work on my own so I asked Margie to come with me. Her presence was a gift to me.

What did you do on the Christmas workshop?

At one point we did the traditional story. I asked, "What do we need to make this story?" "Well we need a star", was the reply. "Who can be the star?" The person who volunteered immediately took up the role fully and extravagantly "Come follow me ..."

And so we set it out. The group were playful and creative.

Instead of shepherds and sheep we had gardeners and pigs crawling around. It was a wonderful scene. And the gardeners with their pigs came to the hut where the mother and child were. We set up the nativity scene with multiple mother and child pairs. Each mother cradled her child, carefully checking him out for nits, supremely tender. Then we reversed roles and every divine child became the mother who sang a song to her baby. One mother started and the took up the lullaby in language. At the end of the song the group went absolutely quiet. There was a sense of stillness as four mothers held four babies, each being the only mother and child on the planet. Some weeping very soft and tender as the beautiful singing had wound down. We wept with the fullness of this love.

After some time we reversed roles back into the gardeners and the pigs and slowly made our

way home. Many pigs escaped up and down the mountain and had to be caught again before finally being tied to a tree so that the gardeners could tend their plants. We had the sharing later on that evening.

The rest of the workshop we worked on personal stories. Each of the women picked something and they would set out what was important to them. I think the workshop was advertised as building their identity as Melanesian sisters and the deeper purpose was to get to know each other from the inside.

Can you give an example of the type of dramas that emerged?

One woman working in a village with people with AIDS set out her first meeting with a man, Patrick. She introduces herself and there is complete silence. The auxiliary playing Patrick made up a response but the protagonist said "No. Patrick said nothing."

It became clear that Patrick couldn't speak. People living with AIDS were the subject of village gossip and he had developed such an extent of shame that he couldn't speak. She spoke deeply about her work in the village.

Returning now to the Chapter, how did the election go?

Near the end of the Chapter a straw vote was held. This was the equivalent of tossing a stick into a river to see where it floated. The idea was for group members to let each other know what they were thinking so that as a group they get a sense of the direction they are heading in. Then it can consider and discuss this as a group.

At lunchtime we invited any of the sisters eligible to stand for office to process their thoughts. This was to deepen the warm up to leadership, to staying in the selection process if they were hesitant. For Melanesian sisters this

was a big thing because the 'ex-pat' Anglo sisters had held leadership for the previous 40 years. As a group we invited them to share their thoughts together. It was a significant step to bring our their hopes and fears because their greatest fear was that they were not up to the task. The conversation clarified for each person what they wanted to do.

When the election came the group elected their first Melanesian woman on the leadership team. More than that, the PNG Chapter had always been auspiced from Brisbane but in 2004 it became a congregation in its own right.

At the end we had an enormous farewell meal, speeches and went out to wait at the airport. For hours and hours. A group came to wait with us and we spent the time telling stories of people's dreams of what they wanted to do, inspiring each other to do their work in the world.

Looking back on your time in PNG what are your reflections?

It was a time of transition: of leadership and in the cultural balance in the group. It was time for them to take their future into their own hands and this occurred. In terms of our work as a group, what stands out is the power of concretisation: the tree, the pigs, the circle, the boat. There is a voice for everyone. We were working in a way where people are in connection with each other: the exhilaration of truth telling.

Early on in the Chapter one of the Melanesian women came up to me and said; *"This is good. You do it Melanesian way."* By this I understood her to mean that there was space for a voice for everyone and time for everyone to have a voice and that through action there was a different way to have a meeting than having to use pencil and paper.

In my groupwork I am getting bolder in experimenting and concretising what is there. I kind of amaze myself, when I look back at my fluidity and keeping applying what I have been learning for years and what I know.

