

SEEDS OF PEACE

SISTER PAT LINNANE AND ALCHERINGA IN MERCY

*'We leave our footprints on the crimson earth
and light our little camp fires in the night
but our human spirit cannot be.
It leaps beyond the canopy of the stars'* Alcheringa



'Many who will read this contribution will be like ourselves, struggling with what Phil Glendenning from ANTaR and the Edmund Rice Centre considers the most important issue on this country's political agenda – the needs and rights of our First and Last Peoples.'

- so writes **Sister Pat Linnane**, about the work of the **Mercy and Justice Centre** at Bathurst, devoted as it is to walking alongside marginalised members of the community, including refugees, people with mental illness, young people and prisoners and their families. For, though quite different in culture and history, the needs of Australia's First and Last Peoples (its Indigenous and refugee populations) share this common: both are frequently ignored, misunderstood, or even deliberately demonised, by others.

No wonder then that Sister Pat and many of her fellow **Sisters of Mercy** are strong supporters of the work and aims of the **Decade to Overcome Violence**. Indeed, across Australia and the wider world, the Sisters of Mercy give a strong lead in sharing the power of compassion – *mercy-power* – and in nurturing acceptance and understanding of *religious and cultural identity and plurality* (the fourth of the four great themes of the Decade to Overcome Violence). Overcoming violence, they know, only comes when we face up to our fear of 'the Other' and reverence our difference.



At the Mercy and Justice Centre in rural Bathurst, there are many visible symbols of this shared commitment to peace and reconciliation: amongst them a Peace Bell and labyrinth, a pathway of handprints for Reconciliation, and Bathurst's own DOV banner.



As Sister Pat observes: *'Our records at the Mercy and Justice Centre cover some quite formidable advocacy efforts of recent years – the Sorry Book, the Walk over the Bridge, the Marronirra Healing Quilt, the dedication of the ground on which the 1896 Federation Garden Party was held to our First Peoples, just to mention a few...As part of Bathurst congregations contribution to Mercy Works Inc, we continue to address the Justice issues in*

the wider community with the conviction that Education is the key to social change.'

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Finding our Alcheringa (our Dreaming,) through Hospitality and telling our Stories

Sister Pat's commitment to Indigenous issues is strengthened by experience. As she says: *'Having served as a Parole Officer with the Department of Corrective Services for six years and acted as a Guardian ad Litem in the Children's Courts in Sydney and in two Children's Homes and Family Crisis Centre, I was challenged by much of the sadness caused through institutionalisation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children, particularly in our Correctional Centres.*



The result has been practical initiatives. Firstly, *Sister Michelle Farrugia and I have a small house of hospitality in which we try to welcome those who find their way to our door searching for 'Alcheringa' in many and diverse ways. We walk on the path formed over many years and to a far less degree than Miriam Gibbons and Patricia Powell did in Redfern and Dubbo in the past.*

Then, in 2004 the Bathurst Mercy Associates supported an initiative of a **'Soup and Damper Yarn Up'** once a month to create an opportunity of dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. *'Each month', says Sister Pat, 'we were privileged to drink from the deep wells of peoples' lives as we entered the story and felt the throbbing heart of those who shared their stories: stories about life on the Mission, about exclusion from school, the first Freedom Ride, about males who went to war but were excluded upon return, about alienation in so many ways, and awareness of a reduced life span compared to non-Indigenous Australians.*

There is something very precious about our 'Yarn Ups' because it provides an arena for dialogue. Try telling an Anzac to forget Gallipoli, yet we have so often suggest that Aboriginal people forget the early days of colonisation in this country and move on.

*I read with delight about wonderful things happening in many parts of Australia and by comparison, our 'Yarn Ups' are very small. However in a city with four custodial institutions within a limited radius and another new one soon to be built in Wellington, with resettlement being our way to relieve pressure in other areas, our community Alcheringa is to foster Harmony with each other, learn from and welcome difference between our cultures around a meal table. Two thousand years ago that was the way Jesus set about promoting love and tolerance and He began around a meal table – not a bad initiative to model...I hope that we are able to continue our gatherings and no doubt we too will be enabled to enter the story and find the throbbing heart of **our** Alcheringa.*

In this year of Eucharist (2005) all it takes is removal of the upper case 'E' to believe that the sacred and the secular are as one around a meal table when we learn to reverence the difference in the "other."

Sources and more information:

www.mercysisters.org.au

Decade to Overcome Violence