**5. Working at the Margins**

By 1990 I had spent twelve challenging years at St Peter’s. Our children had enjoyed settled years at Clifton Terrace School, Rebecca and Joanna going on to Wellington Girls’ College and Jeremy to Wellington College. Jackie had returned to paid work with a part-time position at the National Marriage Guidance office, and later resumed her earlier commercial teaching role at Viard College, a low-decile Roman Catholic school in Porirua. There her skills in counselling were soon recognised and she was appointed guidance counsellor.

For myself I had no clear idea about a next step in ministry. I was not looking to move, but after twelve years, and at age 50, a move could well open up fresh opportunities for me as well as for St Peter’s. In 1986 I had proposed to General Synod that the Anglican Church establish a Social Responsibility Commission (SRC), and this was agreed to. Funding for a full-time commissioner was obtained from the St John’s College Trust as part of its role in supporting theological education, the theory and practice of social justice being seen as part of such education.

With my background and public profile in social justice matters I applied for the job and was rather surprised not to be appointed. Instead, a New Zealand priest resident in the UK for many years had also applied and got the job. But having come to New Zealand and surveyed the scene, he decided the job was not for him after all. Archbishop Brian Davis then approached me and said he hoped I would accept the position, which I did.

Acceptance was not without its personal angst, however. Soon after taking up the new appointment, my good friend and colleague, Bruce Gilberd, by now Bishop of Auckland, sounded me out about being the next Dean of Auckland, at Holy Trinity Cathedral. This was tough. I had never had a game plan for a church ‘career’ but ten years earlier I had said to a colleague that if there was one position in the Church I would like it would be as Dean of Auckland. The combination of good worship, preaching opportunities and being a voice in the city had a strong vocational pull. And now it was on offer, just after I had committed myself to a new social justice position.

I wrestled for several days with this dilemma, each of the positions tugging at me strongly. The timing was awful. But there was no way I could, or would, turn back from the call to address the poverty and justice issues which were worsening at that time. That did not save me, however, from some dark hours one summer evening on a Northland beach where I felt keenly the grief of having taken ‘the road less travelled’.

The SRC’s limited budget of $75,000pa covered my stipend, housing and travel costs around the country. I was provided with a generously-sized room free of charge at the Wellington City Mission in Newtown. A voluntary treasurer handled the small amounts of money involved, and a committee met quarterly as a kind of sounding board. In reality I was very much a ‘one man band' with a general job description but with the specifics to be worked out.

From industrial mission days I knew what it was like to promote something new outside the Church’s traditional parish structures. One is accorded a polite hearing at a diocesan synod before the synod hurries on to consider important matters such as the diocesan budget or church legislation.

I pondered how to handle my new job. There were two distinct elements to be inter-woven, one to resource local churches in the theology and practice of social justice, the other to address the poverty imposed on thousands of New Zealanders as a result of government policies. Radical changes began with a new Labour government in 1984 which introduced policies aimed to put backbone into the economy by promoting initiative and rewarding enterprise. The policies became known as ‘Rogernomics’ after their architect Roger Douglas, the Treasurer. Tax cuts led to disproportionate benefits for the affluent, while reductions in import tariffs threw many thousands out of work as local businesses could not survive against low cost foreign goods. Unemployment figures grew rapidly, and the number of people living in poverty multiplied.

The change to a National government in 1990 entrenched the programme. ‘Rogernomics’ was replaced by ‘Ruthanasia’ under the direction of Ruth Richardson, the new Treasurer. The seats on the government benches were scarcely warmed by their new occupants before sweeping welfare cuts were announced to take effect just before Christmas. Labour laws were toughened to reduce the rights of workers and put more power in the hands of employers. It was said at the time: ‘you incentivise the rich by giving them more money and power, and the poor by giving them less’.

To get the Church on board with the new socio-economic realities, I devised a workshop format with three elements. The first element was a theological one, linking the Creation story of *Genesis* with the *Revelation* story of the world’s ‘end’, or purpose. Common to each story is the vision of a God-centred creation living in harmony and caring for the well-being of humanity and the earth itself. The second element asked participants to list the signs of poverty and stress they saw in their local communities, while the final section explored strategies for addressing poverty locally and becoming voices for justice nationally.

People were deeply concerned by the new levels of poverty. There was an immediate demand for the workshops and, over the period 1990-94, I conducted 150 throughout New Zealand – from Kaikohe to Invercargill, in Greymouth and Gisborne and multiple points in between. Workshops varied in format from an all-day event in Auckland attended by over 100 people to a gathering of 10-20 folk for an evening session in Gore.

Participants were most animated when they broke into groups to discuss poverty in their communities. With felt-tip pens and large sheets of paper they wrote lengthy lists arising from personal experience or local knowledge. Some knew about unemployment having been thrown out of a job with little prospect of new work. Parents knew about poverty because they could not pay the minimal school fees for their kids at the local school, or afford money for them to go on class trips. Children knew because they felt excluded by their peers.

Teachers knew about poverty because they saw students coming to school without lunch or with no shoes or raincoats. Doctors knew because they encountered poverty-related illnesses such as TB, pneumonia, infectious skin diseases, or asthma arising from under-heated houses. Budget advisers knew from their clients that money ran out not because of bad spending but from inadequate incomes. Social workers knew from their experience of two or more families crowding together in one house because decent housing was either unavailable or unaffordable. And foodbanks knew about poverty from the ever-increasing demand for food parcels.

I remember sharing some of these experiences with one of the government’s policy architects. He responded that this was all collateral damage, an inevitable feature of an economy being restructured for the benefit of all. Some 20 years on poverty is undiminished, and the ‘restructuring’ goes on.

In Wellington between seminars I analysed reports from government, trade unions, business, employer groups and social agencies. I also used grass-roots information from the workshops to make media statements on critical issues and wrote opinion pieces for *The Dominion* and *Evening Post.* A public profile grew quickly. In October 1991 *The Listener* did an interview which appeared with the title *The Rev Stirrer.* An informal poll in the Anglican Church nationally found that I was the best known church leader, although I hasten to add that ‘best known’ did not mean ‘most popular’.

I certainly was not popular with the late Roger Kerr of the New Zealand Business Roundtable who called me in for a meeting one day, quizzing me extensively about my annual $75,000 budget. In retrospect I think he wanted to assess what credibility there might be in a one-man operation working out of one room in a church office in a low-decile suburb. In terms of staff and budget the SRC was a minnow compared with the NZBR with its substantial offices in central Wellington, several staff, a budget backed generously by big business and the capacity to commission research on social and economic policy.

But what the NZBR totally lacked was the grass-roots contact I had weekly with the poor and those working with them. The deepening realities of poverty were invisible to Wellington policy-makers in both business and government. Their only knowledge of the poor was through cold statistics on pieces of paper, not by personal encounter with the daily realities of homeless people and sick children.

I received telephone calls from Members of Parliament and government officials inviting me for a chat. I am not sure I handled those interviews as well as I might. Sometimes the conversations were diffuse, on one occasion veering off into a discussion about the philosophy of Karl Popper. In retrospect I feel I should have been more pointed in my comments, challenging policy-makers to reconcile their policies with the extreme deprivation being experienced by thousands of Kiwi citizens, and to consider the social morality of their decisions.

Grass-roots poverty was endorsed by official statistics. Tax cuts meant the top 20% of earners saw their net income increase by 7% between 1987 and 1992, while the bottom 20% went down 2.9%. Welfare cuts were vicious: a married couple, unemployed, with two children suffered a cut of 7.9%. The cut for a single beneficiary with two children was 8.9%, while for a single unemployed person aged 21-24 years the cut was 24.7%. One mother told me poverty was cumulative: ‘Everything starts to run down and wear out. But even more than that, your resilience goes. You use up all your mental resources as well as your human ones.’

By 1991 unemployment had swollen to 10.9% as a result of economic restructuring. There was a disproportionate impact on Maori and Pacific Islanders whose unemployment rates were three times the average, and also on young people aged 15-19 whose unemployment rate was twice the average.

One young woman only two years out of school said she had applied for every office job in Rotorua without success, and had now lost the confidence to go out and mix with strangers. ‘I’m at home all day, I do nothing, I see nothing. I know what I’m looking for in life, but because I’m not working none of it is possible.’ A report at the time[[1]](#footnote-1) said:

Unemployment is a human tragedy. The cost is not merely in financial terms, but in the realities of despair and meaninglessness, children growing up without the basics of clothing, health and education, young people having their futures closed down in the prime of life, and older people losing their dignity and their friends at a time in life when they might expect a degree of ease and security. A whole generation is growing up whose lives are being wasted before they have even begun.

Other churches shared these concerns and in 1993 the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services called on church leaders to join them in addressing the adverse impacts of government policies on vulnerable groups in society. Ten of the churches[[2]](#footnote-2) responded and worked together to produce a major report published in 1993.[[3]](#footnote-3) Edited by Ruth Smithies and Helen Wilson, the report drew on the expertise of 36 clergy and church members.

This comprehensive document was distributed to all churches as a guide for study and action. Topics addressed included unemployment, housing, families and children, health, welfare and taxation. A basis of Christian values was set out considering such topics as the common good, the value of work, a preferential option for the poor, and how Christian ethics intersected with policy-making. Resources for worship were inter-woven with strategies for action.

A statement was prepared to be read out in congregations nationwide in January 1993. It was reported that Prime Minister Jim Bolger, a committed Roman Catholic, had been surprised at Mass when the statement was read. Somewhat disconcerted, he attended Mass the following Sunday in a different church where, because the mail had arrived late the previous week, he heard the statement read for a second time.

The Business Roundtable was alarmed by the impact the churches were having in under-mining the ideology of economic rationalism. To counter this the NZBR invited an American Roman Catholic priest, Father Robert Sirico, to visit New Zealand. This was a common ploy to import an overseas ‘expert’, carefully selected as a supporter of policy proposals on education, health, housing, taxation or other major topic. Upon arrival the expert was briefed with current data before setting out to give a series of lectures and media interviews authenticating government plans.

Fr Robert Sirico was considered an expert in theology and social justice. In the USA he was regularly on the speaking circuit with a variety of addresses supporting New Right socio-economic policies. In his addresses, Fr Robert outlined his own background as having once been engaged in social service activities such as handing out food parcels to the poor. However, he had come to realise that this was an endless and self-defeating task and that policy changes to give the poor a ‘hand up’ rather than a ‘handout’ was the better way to go.

The churches fully supported giving people a hand up to independence and self-sufficiency. The problem was what happened in the meantime. It was a worthy aim to be taking steps towards full employment, such as had been the case until 1975. But with unemployment running at 11% in the 1990s, people still had to be fed and housed. The official assumption seemed to be that the poor, tens of thousands of them, would just have to wait, even if it took years. They are still waiting.

A highlight of Fr Sirico’s visit was an address to a corporate dinner party at an up-market Wellington hotel. Business leaders paid $100 or more for a ticket, and a good crowd signed up. But church leaders were an important part of the target audience, the organisers believing the churches needed to have their theology and social justice views informed by a foreign expert. But no church leader was going to pay $100, nor in fact any money at all, to listen to someone whose message they knew all too well. So a charity table was established for several of us in an outer circle which was dramatically transformed into outer darkness when the lights were dimmed for Fr Sirico’s address.

At question time I raised an issue and, although I was invisible in the gloom to the speaker, he had no difficulty identifying from which table the question came. ‘Thank you, comrade, for that question,’ he began his response. Meanwhile from another table, a corporate one, a question was raised about a statistic given in the address. ‘Were we aware,’ Fr Sirico had asked, ‘that every welfare beneficiary in New Zealand costs the taxpayer $80,000 annually?’ The questioner asked for an explanation of this amount which seemed inordinately high, especially in 1993 values.

It was an easy calculation, the speaker replied, quoting the actual figures: one simply divided the total welfare payout by the number of beneficiaries and the result was $80,000. He went on to deal with other questions, but some table-cloth recalculation was going on at the first table. The questioner said they had done the arithmetic on the $80,000 calculation and found the amount was only $8000. Fr Sirico was quite unfazed: ‘must have slipped a decimal point,’ he replied, ‘but it’s still a lot of money.’

I was only four years in the social justice job, but I found it most fulfilling to bring insights and action strategies on crucial national and local issues to the hundreds who attended the 150 seminars. A high media profile helped to bring challenge and hope to the wider population and I received good feedback, even from some with different views who felt the issues I raised were real and well documented.

People were greatly distressed by the mayhem they saw being visited on their communities. Decent people were suffering real hardship, and feeling the failure of not being able to provide adequately for their children. To many decision-makers the poor were simply numbers on their computer. What decision-maker ever saw his or her family suffer during those times? On the contrary, they saw their salaries increase as taxes were reduced. One senior politician said to me: ‘we’re just ordinary people like anybody else, you know, Richard; you can see us around the super-market and launching our boats at the beach on the weekend’.

But the incident with Jim Bolger and the 1993 social justice statement highlighted the tension caused by the impact the churches’ public voice had on church members inside the policy-making processes. This became apparent during two dialogues I convened in 1994 between Members of Parliament and church social justice leaders. Labour MPs were invited to one meeting and National MPs to the other, with about a dozen attending in each case. Those of us on the social justice side listened to extended speeches about the pain MPs had felt on the receiving end of church statements, or at church on Sundays enduring sermons on the poverty and injustice that stalked the land.

I acknowledge the integrity and compassion of many in government, business and the public service, both Christians and others. It has been my privilege to work with them as members of congregations I have served. Some have quit the church but others in senior roles have continued over long years and I affirm their vision and commitment. The difficulty through the 1990s was that the debate of necessity became very polarised because of the extreme socio-economic policy settings and the unprecedented hardship this was visiting on hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders.

The churches’ voice was strong in advocacy for the latter. But opposition to the policies was construed as opposition to reform, and the churches were tagged as old-fashioned socialists whose basic viewpoint was ‘up the taxes and dish out the cash’. This was a misrepresentation. From a biblical viewpoint careful stewardship of scarce resources is an ongoing principle, but managing resources for the common good is the ultimate goal. Resource management is no more than a means to that goal and all the evidence showed little common good coming from the reforms. Those who could afford least were bleeding, while those who had plenty of fat to come and go on were doing well.

I have never heard a policy-maker say the changes were not for the common good. But with the hardships having continued now for 30 years, claims to be working for the common good are entirely vacuous. The MPs at the two sessions were surprised to learn the churches did not oppose reform per se. But the new policies were locked in and not open to review. The impact of the churches in the early 1990s enabled local responses to poverty, and created in the public mind a groundswell for change further down the track.

1. *Hand to Mouth,* Inner City Ministry, Wellington, 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The churches were Salvation Army, Presbyterian, Society of Friends, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, Associated Churches of Christ, Apostolic and Anglican. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Making Choices: Social Justice for our Times.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)