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Brewing Truth: The Priest

I grew up in Brisbane. My father was of German descent and was a naturalised Australian citizen, as they called them in those days. During the Second World War, there was a day when he didn't come home from work. He'd been picked up and taken to the internment camp in Tatura, Victoria. I was only about four and understood nothing about what was going on, just that I missed my father. I witnessed my mother trying to reverse the injustice that had taken place. Back in those days there was no family support. The family was knocked about by that. We hadn't just lost dad, we'd also lost our breadwinner.

My motivation to become a priest was my being impressed with two priests at our parish—the parish priest and his assistant. The parish priest had supported our family quite strongly when dad was incarcerated and after he came home. After I was ordained I worked for five years in parish work. Then I was appointed to be the archdiocesan chaplain for secondary students to Young Christian Students (YCS). So for the next five years I worked part-time in two parishes and part-time with the students. Then I asked the archbishop to allow me to work with the students on a full-time basis.

Sean, the chaplain of Young Christian Workers, and myself were taking Vatican II seriously. Vatican II tried to bring the church out of its ghetto and said that the church exists to make the world a better place. Vatican II wanted the church to identify the problems of the world, which it called the 'Signs of the Times', and to respond to those concerns of nuclear arms, the arms race—all those big problems—in accordance with the principles

of the Gospel. So it was quite revolutionary. Sean and I were doing study on it and we were having a lot of difficulty with our peers. We thought it would be good to live under the one roof and support one another. So, in 1973, we moved into this big house, the Lodge, and used it as a meeting place for young students and workers to talk about their lives and Vatican II. In 1974, we came across the work on liberation theology by Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez. For Gutiérrez the starting point was 'the other'. If I do not place myself in the world of the other, then I do not understand the Gospel. The Gospel emphasises conversion—to 'convert' is to go from one's own world to the world of the other. To be poor is to be part of a social group of races, cultures, peoples and classes. The poor person is a product of our society, and to come into the world of the poor is to come into the action of history. Gutiérrez concluded that to be a Christian is to come into the world of the poor and to know real conversion. We, as a staff at the Lodge, photocopied relevant chapters discussing them together as part of our work with homeless young people and other social justice activities we were engaged in at the time.

Some of the young people who came to our meetings were from very troubled domestic situations and would wander around the streets at night until things settled down at home. There were no youth refuges around Brisbane and authorities could lock up young people who hadn't committed a criminal offence. Sean and I said to these young people that rather than being on the streets they could ring us up and we would pick them up. They could stay at the Lodge and we would take them home when they thought it was safe. So the Lodge also became an accommodation centre.

The Queensland *Children's Services Act 1965* allowed for children to be incarcerated if they were deemed to be in 'moral danger', 'likely to lapse into a life of vice or crime' or 'uncontrollable'. Hearsay evidence was sufficient in court and so unscrupulous police used the Children's Court to clean up their crime sheets. So the main way to deal with homeless young people was to lock them up. Most homeless young people were running away from violence at home and then many police were also being violent to these young people. On the one hand, Children's Services workers at the time had a fairly impossible caseload. They were very poorly trained and monitored so it was easier for them to send a young person to be locked up at Wilson Youth Hospital for psychiatric assessment than it was to do substantial work with them.

One day Sean got a phone call from an aunt of a girl who had been placed in Wilson saying that her niece wanted to see a Catholic priest so Sean went and saw the girl and met up with the manager at the time. Sean came home and suggested that we take on the chaplaincy there together, which we began in October 1973. Sean and I would go to Wilson and see young people individually.

We asked them, ‘How are you going? How are you handling this place? Have you had any contact with your family?’—just that very important human stuff. Some of them would ask us if we could write a letter to their parents or someone else significant. In Queensland, kids could be locked up at the age of eight and so some of those kids were illiterate. When boys at Wilson turned 15, they were sent to Westbrook but girls at Wilson were kept on there and most of the girls were incest survivors.

Wilson was such a violent place. I saw young people being restrained. Most of the staff were untrained. I heard the staff call the girls ‘sluts’. I hate that word. The boys would be called ‘savages’. The dehumanising was just awful. In Wilson there was a magistrate who visited once a month but that was just tokenism.

One senior staff member at Wilson who was a trained psychiatric nurse, said to me, ‘I will not stand for violence on my shift. If young people are being violent to one another, that has to stop. If staff are being violent to young people, I get them off my shift straight away.’ He worked on the boys’ side, and when that nurse started his shift I could see the boys breathe a sigh of relief when they saw him.

Sean and I tried to bring about changes in the system as they were being revealed to us. As we were getting to know how Wilson was run, we were voicing our concerns to people in power there. For example, after four weeks in Wilson, an inmate, if they ‘behaved themselves’, was eligible for weekend leave with their families but there was no leave for those children who came from outside Brisbane or were brought up in an orphanage or didn’t have a family. We thought that we could take a couple of children, chosen by management, out on a Saturday or Sunday. Those children who came to the Lodge on the weekend were so pleased to get out of Wilson for a day. We didn’t do anything special because we were impoverished ourselves but someone might be baking a cake and they would help and there’d be good conversation while they were cooking or they’d use the trampoline or they’d be invited to go for a drive with a group of us.

It was day out for them from an institution where they could catch their breath. After we started our chaplaincy at Wilson young people who were homeless or in need started turning up on our doorstep at the Lodge.

We knew a couple of social work students from YCS. They wanted to know how to help. Sean and I said that there was very little follow up from the Department of Children's Services once children leave Wilson and so we suggested that they follow up one ex-inmate each from Wilson with our supervision. These social work students did this and the more they got to learn about Wilson, the more they became concerned about it and these young social workers established the Wilson Protest Group.

There was a girl I remember at Wilson, Tammy, who was about 12. She was one of the children that I would talk to. Tammy always seemed to be spaced out and so it was hard to make a connection with her. Then, one day, I was talking to her and everything was hunky dory. We had a good conversation.

I felt that I could be direct with her and so I asked her, 'Tammy, why is it that we are able to speak together so well now, whereas, on the other occasions, we've not been able to?' She said, 'Oh, I haven't taken the pills they gave me.'

In 1974, I got nominated to attend an international students conference in Maastricht, Holland, and I was due for a bit of long service leave and so I was away for three or four months. About two weeks before I was due to go I heard that Tammy had been certified and sent to Wolston Park and locked up in Osler House with the criminally insane. I couldn't believe it! I rang everybody and anybody that I could to try to get this reversed. She had already gone. People said that they would follow it up. Maybe they did. Maybe they didn't. I don't know but I was gone.

When I came back, I found out that Sean had been transferred to Gympie, over two hours drive from Brisbane. It was really a punitive transfer because we had been protesting against the Vietnam War. We were supporting young Catholics in Vietnam who had been tortured. Church leaders saw us as unpatriotic because Australian soldiers were in Vietnam and we were told that we should have been supporting them. The church in Brisbane hadn't woken up to what Vatican II was about and the social justice message in the Gospel.

I was doing the chaplaincy at Wilson by myself, while grieving the loss of Sean and having to run the Lodge as well as doing my work with YCS. There was so much going on that I didn't follow up the matter about Tammy. There was a girl, Mary, who had been in solitary confinement for three weeks at Wilson. I had tried to see her but they wouldn't let me. Then one day, as I was leaving, I saw this man in a suit, waiting to be let out. We started talking. He said, 'I'm a psychiatrist and I come from the community. I have this horrible job of coming in here and assessing children for Wolston Park.' I noticed that he was wringing his hands. I thought, 'You may be wringing your hands, mate, but you're still doing this terrible, flaming job of sending children up there.'

Anyway, Mary ended being sent to Osler House at Wolston Park and so I went to visit her there because I heard that she wasn't getting any visitors. I'd been to Wolston Park before but not to Osler House. I rocked up there. I said to staff that I was a chaplain at Wilson Youth Hospital and that I wanted to visit Mary. They let me see Mary and I said to her, 'You don't know me. You don't have to talk to me if you don't want to. I'm here because I knew that you were in Wilson and I tried to see you there on at least three occasions and they wouldn't let me so I thought I'd come up to say "hello" and see how you are going.' We sat in lounge chairs and she talked non-stop for half an hour and who walked past? Tammy! I nearly died! Oh my god! She had been there for a year. That poor girl was still there!

On another occasion when I was talking to Mary, she started screaming. This adult patient had crept up on her and sunk her teeth into Mary's arm. There were some very disturbed adult women in that place, and the place itself was probably disturbing them a hell of a lot more. I didn't like the atmosphere of Osler House. It was worse than Wilson. I was absolutely appalled that we would send young people there and have them locked up with those who had been judged by the courts to be criminally insane. Wilson was violent and so I also assumed that Osler House was violent. From what I could see, there was no monitoring, no oversight, and no therapeutic or educational programs of any kind.

Then I met a psychologist who worked there. She kept an eye on the young people being sent to Osler House and tried to get them transferred to open wards. So, as a result, the word on the grapevine at Wilson among the teenagers was the way to get out of the system was to do something to pretend that you were mad so that you get certified and sent out to

Osler House at Wolston Park, then get transferred to an open ward and then escape. I thought, 'Yep! Good on ya. Use the system. The system was using and abusing them. They might as well as do it to them.' For those who did have somewhere to go, it meant that they could go home.

Then the Wilson Protest Group started to get good publicity that was critical of the institution. Every time there was an article in the papers there'd be a witch-hunt at Wilson to try to find out who was the source of information to the media. They assumed it was me and so, in January 1976, I was asked to leave Wilson. They stopped the chaplaincy. I was sacked. Those at the Department of Children's Services had the authority to do whatever they wanted.

I used to say, 'Plenty of juveniles. No justice.' Those young people never saw the system work for them. It was always working against them. They were not represented in courts. They had no access to any kind of advocacy. There were some staff who had standards and did their best during their shifts but there was also dreadful stuff going on. The law was being transgressed. The law said you had to be aged eight or older to be sent to Wilson but I saw six and seven year olds there. Little kids! Totally against the law. Every time anything critical about Wilson was said publicly, the minister would say that Wilson was full of murderers, rapists and arsonists. The media loved that. I worked in Wilson for three years. I never met a murderer or a rapist in there. I met two or three arsonists.

After I got turfed out of Wilson, we did a big study of the juvenile justice system—the police, Wilson Youth Hospital, welfare, their relationships with young people, alternatives to that and recommendations. We established the group 'Justice for Juveniles'. We lobbied for years to get Wilson closed down. Wilson was a hopeless place. It wasn't purpose-built. One boy had described it as like living in wheelie bin. I started to give public lectures.

In 1980, Justice for Juveniles put together a proposal and sought funding for the establishment of a Youth Advocacy Centre. My living at the Lodge and listening to the stories of young homeless people, many of whom had been unjustly locked up in Wilson, told me that the suffering these young people had been subjected to was preventable. Young people needed to see that the justice system could work for them not just against them. Skilled social workers were needed to look at the causes of offending, deal with these, and thus prevent the young person from appearing in court again.

During my study leave I came across several youth legal centres overseas. They were of two kinds: centres for legal advice alone, or centres with lawyers and social workers working together. From the research carried out by Justice for Juveniles, we knew that young people in Brisbane needed much more than that—and so we designed a new model consisting of legal advice, social work assistance for communities, an after-hours service to help young people when questioned by police, consultancy and education for professionals and research. We were successful and, in the next year, Brisbane's Youth Advocacy Centre was established. It's still going.

The situation for children now, in theory, we've got covered. We've got children's commissioners at both federal and state levels. We've got health rights people. But you need two things: you need very strong, solid legislation for the children's commission and good health rights legislation. I'm not sure that we've got that. In Queensland, because we don't have an upper house in parliament, we need to enshrine a Bill of human rights, including children's rights, into our legislation. Also, the current Queensland Family and Child Commission needs to be resourced adequately and commissioners need to be strong in their advice and in standing up to government. Often young people are voiceless and powerless and need people to walk with them. Young people are capable of reflection and drawing their own valid conclusions about what could make systems better. So it is important to listen to them, to advocate with and for them, and also to affirm their dignity.

I grieve that young people have been abused by people who profess to be Christian. What they have done is the very antithesis of what they say they are on about. Also, the way that the church has mismanaged this is heinous, and for them to say 'We didn't understand' is an absolute nonsense from a Gospel perspective. What don't they understand about Jesus saying, 'If you scandalise one of these little ones, it'd be better if you had a millstone tied around your neck and cast into the depths of the sea'? That's pretty plain. I don't think that can be interpreted any other way than in its strong, stark meaning. I don't have any sympathy for those in the church who say 'poor us'. And even with the Royal Commission hearings, from where I sit, I don't see that much change has taken place in the church.

I was pleased when I heard that Leneen Forde was chosen to run the 1998 inquiry into Queensland's institutions for children. The Forde Inquiry was a step in the right direction. There had been a couple of previous inquiries.

There had been the Demack Report into Wilson in 1975, but none of the recommendations, as far as I knew, were implemented. But the Forde Inquiry did not deal with child patients at Wolston Park Hospital. That was a big omission and it also was a reprehensible omission on my part because we didn't include that in our report 'Justice for Juveniles'. Those young people in Wolston Park were well and truly 'out of sight, out of mind'. They were truly forgotten. Former child survivors of Wolston Park need to be given a house and a gold card for health services. The education of their children needs to be supported. That's the least we can do.

I was walking to an appointment this morning and while I was waiting at the pedestrian crossing, a van for a brand of alcoholic drink drove past and big letters on the side of it said, 'Brewing Truth'. I thought, 'That's what I try to do—brew truth.'

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