

The Sea of Faith (NZ)

Annual Report 2012



Natali Allen

This weekend we celebrate 20 years of the Sea of Faith in New Zealand and the twentieth conference of the Sea of Faith in New Zealand. Thus it seems appropriate that we use the opportunity to consider not only the past twenty years of our organisation, but also our role in the future.

However, first I would like to remember three of our members who have died in the past year and to acknowledge the friendship, encouragement, support and leadership that each in his or her own way offered to members of their local groups and the Network as a whole.

Jean Annie Walsh JP OBE

A long-standing member of the Waikato Branch of the Sea of Faith was well known in the Waikato as an Educationalist, and leader and Commissioner in the Girl Guide Movement. She has been remembered as a person of authority, with a strong sense of responsibility, generous in many causes, a person living life to the full in working to help others.

Edna Mae Cairns

The name of Edna Mae Cairns appears with that of her husband Ian on the initial document of Incorporation of the Sea of Faith in New Zealand in 1996, and that of the Dunedin group in 1997. Following a meeting at the First Church manse in 1992 where the Sea of Faith film series was introduced, the Dunedin Group was formed with Mae as Secretary for the first two years. Ian and Mae remained active members of the group until 1999 when they left for Wellington and Ian died in 2000. Mae is remembered for the delight, happiness, care and sharing which signified her life.

Donald Chapple Feist

Don, a Presbyterian Minister was a also founding member of both the Dunedin Group and the National Network of the Sea of Faith. He was a National Steering Group member from 2008-11 and Chairperson of the Dunedin Group from 2004-6. In Don's contributions as Editor of the Dunedin Newsletter and a prolific contributor to both that and the National Newsletter, his ability to stimulate thought were always appreciated. Perhaps less obvious was his support and generosity in giving of his time, knowledge and experience as a committed, thoughtful and supportive presence amongst us. As a leader Don exemplified for each of us the role of one who



has an interest in exploring religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human oriented standpoint.

And now I wish to thank those who have ensured the smooth running of the Network through the past year

First of all I would like to say thank you to **Stephen Warnes** and those in Auckland who have worked to bring us together this weekend and ensure the success of our time together in this lovely setting. We recognise the effort that any group which accepts responsibility for Conference must make and are grateful to all those who have worked over the past months to make this the enjoyable experience it already promises to be.

The Steering Committee this year has been made up of nine members assisted by four people who have ongoing support roles. This year five of us; **Alan Jackson, Stephen Warnes, Steve Collard, Philip Grimmatt and myself**, will complete our terms and over the past year the Committee has been exercised to identify and nominate new Committee members from local groups. Thus we are grateful to those who have agreed to accept nomination to the Committee today and for anyone who would like to get to know the strengths and fellowship of the Sea of Faith Network – there is always the opportunity to become a Steering Groups member.

I want to thank all the members of the Steering Committee, **Alan Jackson** as Secretary, **Pete Cowley** as Treasurer, **Bev Smith** as Local groups coordinator and each one for the particular roles they have taken in support of me as Chairperson and in the work of the Committee as a whole.

I wish also to say thank you too, to those who work quietly year after year in the background and in a voluntary capacity supporting the Steering Committee and the Network as a whole. **Suzi Thirwall** as Manager of the Resource Centre, **Noel Cheer** as Editor and Web-master and **Yvonne Curtis** as Newsletter Distributor. This year a special thank you is due to **Alison Eng** our Archivist, whose work has increased and been focused on ensuring that the archives of our first twenty years are complete and well maintained. Through the past three years I have experienced how valuable our Archive is and I encourage you to look at the display here at Conference. It is an fascinating mine of information.

And now the Network as a Whole:

It was in 1993 through the weekend of the 3rd to the 5th of September that the first National Conference, was held in Bryant Hall at the University of Waikato. This followed the interest gendered by Don Cupitt's visit to New Zealand in 1991 which was maintained by Lloyd Geering through early Newsletters. It was at Hamilton that the first statement about the nature of the Sea of Faith in New Zealand was discussed and drafted, and the first Steering Committee, was set up with Ian Harris as Chairperson. That Conference was attended by around 220 people (as were all the Conferences well into the 1990's, and more than double those here today) and by 1994 a Constitution had been written with Network becoming Incorporated on the 18th October 1996.

Following the Hamilton Conference the 1994 AGM minutes report that there were 517 member household/members. Today our Network membership list is made up of 397 households with a total of 575 individuals, and of these over 100 households have been



"members" since 1993. Over and above these there are the unknown numbers who align themselves with the Network and/or attend local groups and Conferences.

For us as individuals we have the excellent resources of the Newsletter, and for those connected to the internet the three web sites – all of which offer material to stimulate and enhance our thought and discussion. Thank you Noel Cheer, Alan Jackson, Ian Fleming and Laurie Chisholm for the material which is made available to us all in these sites.

Local Groups

Our Network of individuals is supported by local groups. Preceding the National Conference in 1993 local groups had formed in Auckland and Dunedin, and by 1996 there were probably 29 active groups throughout the country. Today there are nineteen local Sea of Faith groups and three Ephesus groups, which range in size from the larger Otago and Christchurch groups to smaller house groups sometimes of three or four individuals. While our larger city groups appear stronger, groups in smaller centres often work hard to maintain numbers to meet. The question of how we support fellowship in these areas is thus one of importance.

The first group newsletter was sent by the then Chairperson, Jane Griffith on 13th April 1998 though it was not until 2006 on the Betty Manning's initiative that a Local Groups Coordinator was appointed by the Steering Committee. Today Beverley Smith of the Steering Committee works to provide communication and support for these groups, for we know that as with any democratic organisation, it is the interest, and strength of those "on the ground" which is reflected in the health and influence of the organisation as a whole.

Support for Local groups has also continued in the Resource Centre and the Travel Grant. As far as the Resource Centre goes there have been several excellent additions to the collections including up to date DVD's which can provide the material for group meetings and personal study. However the Resource Centre has not been widely used and the Travel grant has been used by only one group this year.

The Future

At least since 2007 there had been concern about the on going viability of the Network. Again this year our membership has remained fairly constant although over the past few years activity in groups does appear to be decreasing. We assume that this arises from the increasing age of our members, but then the average age of any group only increases when there are no younger members joining the group, and despite ongoing discussion this seems to be so in our case.

Next year's conference will be at the Pukeora Estate south of Waipukarau and as we enter our third decade it seems to me that the future of the Network will arise in the breadth, openness and quality of our discussion, and our willingness to consider and then express a spirituality that has some meaning in that future.

We can reflect that Conference 1993 provided the beginning of a context and confidence in which we have been able to explore, reevaluate and redefine, often quite radically, the structure of our individual belief and faith. If it is so that today's world is one in which humanity is entering an entirely new era, and with this, the opportunity for the creation of new values and ways of living, there must be a role for a group which claims to facilitate the exploration of religious thought and expression from a non dogmatic and human oriented standpoint.



The question that was first asked In 1997 by Ian Harris at the end of the first Chairmanship of the Network was:

"Are we content to be aging observers of religious thought and practice , when we could become discoverers and agents of creative new expressions of meaning awe and wonder?"

Today we heard a response in Lloyd's paper:

"Just what particular forms tomorrow's spirituality will take is not for any individual to prescribe. It is rather for each one of us to assist in it's evolution, to move beyond a spirituality focused simply on the divine and the human, to a spirituality concerned with survival of the natural world in its full splendour, its fertility, and its integral well-being as the larger spiritual community to which we belong."

We each have the opportunity to do this within and beyond the Sea of Faith Network.

**Thank you
Natali Allen
Chairperson 2009-2012**