



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

We're gonna sit at the welcome table

Rachel Mackintosh © 6 August 2023

I met Clay 10 years ago at a residential training for community organising. The basis of the training was storytelling.

At the opening of the training, all participants were asked to tell stories about a time we had spoken truth to power. Clay's story was about taking the Anglican Bishop of Auckland to the Human Rights Commission for violation of the Human Rights Act because he refused to ordain a gay priest.

My story was about standing up to a union leader who, to a largely but not totally white male audience, had used the phrase "dirty girls of the Philippines" to refer to migrant sex workers. I confronted him privately and told him I had been offended at his use of language that was imperialist, misogynist and anti-worker. He went back to that audience and apologised, even though many of them had found his language perfectly acceptable.

As all the people in the room told their stories, we began to see that all of us had not only identified injustices but had also had moments of courage where we had spoken up. Some of our stories had had successful outcomes, but many had not. Many of us had acted alone. All of our stories had promise. When one person shows courage in the face of injustice, that act holds the kernel of transformational change.

In the training, we learned to tell stories in order to make connections. We learned that, through hearing each other's stories, we would form relationships and that, by being organised, we could identify common themes in our stories — find a particular injustice that we could fight against together.

In our Auckland Unitarian community, we have a story. We have stories. To take the themes from the verses of the hymn we have just sung, we have stories that come from each theme:

Through our senses, we experience community together. We hear the music, the services and sermons, the things we share in joys and concerns, in our conversation groups, and over morning tea. We see each other on screen or in person. We taste shared food. We hear our organ and see and feel our newly painted building and beautifully cleaned surroundings. Through these experiences, our community is formed and sustained.

Through our reason and our commitment to reason, our community is strengthened. We may take meaning from the story of the resurrection, or of Moses parting the Red Sea, or of the stories of Buddha, or Mohammed, but no one is required to believe things that our reason tells us can't be so; there is no emperor with no clothes, there is no elephant in the room. We have no underlying fear that some received truth is actually hollow.

Through our compassion, we care for each other and for others. We cared for each other through lockdown, cared as we could, meeting online and drawing in people from places beyond Auckland. Through our peace and social justice committee, we use our resources so that children at Glen Taylor School can have books to read and can go on camp — things that many

people take for granted and that, for many others, are out of reach. We support a programme for dyslexic Tongan and Samoan children.

Through our conscience, we identify injustice and act to combat it. Every year we donate half of our Christmas Eve offertory to Rainbow Youth, a group working for justice and decent lives for young people in the queer community. We provided a place for the Polynesian Panthers in the 1970s to run homework clubs for Pasifika children living in this area. We joined the Living Wage movement in 2014, and our craftivists have done political art to support the movement and influence decision-makers to pay the living wage to more and more working people. We gave sanctuary to vulnerable Indian students in 2017, recognising them as the most vulnerable group in an international system of the commodification of training and of migrant workers.

And then there is our vision. We have a vision of a world governed by love, not by violence. A world where justice shall roll down like waters. We have a vision of a planet transformed by our and everyone's care. We have a vision of a beloved community.

And we also have our story of right now. We have become aware through Clay's sermons this winter that the history of Unitarianism is a story of change and adaptation. We have confronted the need to move on from seven principles that felt immutable for those of us who feel eternity in our own brief blink of history. In fact, those principles were adopted by Unitarian Universalists less than 40 years ago. We have confronted the need to have a plan for when Clay retires. We have faced the tension of how to have a strong community that is not insular. We are bound by what we have in common and what is comfortable, and we know we need to be open to what may be uncomfortable and to diverse people.

The kernel of the answer to these challenges is right here.

We are already a welcoming people.

We are already a member of the Living Wage Movement.

As Clay said last week when we are generous, we also benefit. When we take the courage to form connections with people who are different from us, we thrive in ways we can't foresee.

We have also recently joined [Te Ohu Whakawhanaunga](#).

Anyone who has worked in non-government organisations knows how precarious funding is. People working to improve their communities spend huge amounts of their time on funding applications, from the council, from the ASB, from Lotteries, and from various philanthropic charities. They can't plan more than a year out because most funding is annual.

The philanthropic Mackenzie family recognised this problem. They said that they wanted to invest a large sum of money in a long-term, far-reaching programme of social change. But that it should be coordinated. They didn't want to continue investing in many different but largely unconnected groups for short-term projects that were undoubtedly doing good but weren't fundamentally changing our society.

In response to this offer, Te Ohu Whakawhanaunga was formed — in fact it is still forming. The name Te Ohu Whakawhanaunga was a gift from the Māori Women's Welfare League, one of the member organisations.

I will pause here a moment for a word study. Clay got us into the groove of these last week, and I know that, secretly, many of us love them. Also, then we'll all know what the name means.

First, "Te Ohu". According to *Te Aka Maori Dictionary* online, Te Ohu is a "working bee, working party, volunteer workers, commune, cooperative, [or] collective enterprise".

"Whakawhanaunga" is a word that can be broken down.

"Whaka" is to make or transform oneself.

“Whanaunga” is family or kin.

So Te Ohu Whakawhanaunga is a collective, voluntary enterprise to transform ourselves into family or community.

Te Ohu Whakawhanaunga is a community alliance.

At the moment it is based in Auckland, but the vision is to expand it around the country.

And the vision of Te Ohu is to build strong communities that work together for a better society.

In the words of Susan Adams, a leader from one of Te Ohu’s member organisations, “We want a whole new public consensus on what we are prepared to accept as the quality of life for our children and those who are currently impoverished.”

Te Ohu so far has member organisations from across communities, faith organisations and unions.

Through the kind of story-telling that I began this talk with, the alliance has already identified three main themes to work on, but the organisers also work with all and any member organisations on their own particular issues. The three themes are:

- Housing
- Migrant, former refugee and asylum seekers issues
- Decent work

One of the techniques Te Ohu uses is to identify who has the ability to deliver the kind of change the community seeks.

In many cases, the people with that ability are politicians. Te Ohu is not party political and will deliver its message to and ask for action from any person in power who has the capacity to deliver change.

In this spirit, Te Ohu has organised a launch event for early September, to be held in Māngere. See poster below. The leaders of both Labour and National have confirmed that they will attend, alongside other party leaders.

There will be music and food, and community members will tell their stories of what they are experiencing in the areas of housing, work and migrant issues. The politicians will have an opportunity to answer questions about what they are committed to doing to solve the issues (they get advance notice of the questions they will be asked).

Because we are members now, we are wanting a great contingent of Auckland Unitarians and our friends to attend. Betsy will be arranging carpooling and we want to know in advance who will be coming.

Let us go together to sit at that welcome table.

Discussion question:-

When have you spoken truth to power and how has it transformed you?



TE OHU TĀMAKI FOUNDING DAY

6TH SEPTEMBER, 2023

LESIELI TONGA AUDITORIUM
143 FAVONA ROAD, MĀNGERE
6PM TO 8PM

Join hundreds of your fellow community, faith, union, and Māori organisational leaders as we join together as an alliance to have our voice heard on some big issues, like Housing, Decent Work, and Migrant, Former Refugee and Asylum seeker issues.

The Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition will be there alongside other party leaders.

Food and drink will be available.
Friends and family welcome.

**RSVP YOUR TICKET NOW BY
SCANNING THIS QR CODE**



Or visit: <https://events.humanitix.com/te-ohu-tamaki-founding-day>
For more info contact: contact@teohu.community