

**Reframing How We Talk About Each Other: Words That Work Workshop Holy Trinity
Cathedral, Auckland
4 March 2020**

‘Unsettling the Word’ ... ‘Word of God’ ... ‘Words that Work’.

To quickly recap, today we have engaged with words that work as a communication tool designed to assist in effectively reframing the way we talk about the ‘other’, and the way we communicate with each other. The hope is that such reframing might be more effective in touching people’s hearts and minds in our advocacy work for human rights and social justice.

Put another way, ‘words that work’ (WtW) seeks to be an effective tool of communication by appealing to personal narratives and common values as strategies for moving people to concrete action for justice for those struggling with injustices, specifically in this case, refugees and asylum seekers.

My role is to offer academic and theological framing into the mix, with a particular emphasis on insights around relational tools for building bridges of friendship and trust, so that we might move hearts and minds to make a difference in the lives of those who are front-line victims of injustices in our society – so that we can create a better society for all.

A key goal of this final session is to explore further how we may translate WTW and apply it to *other areas of marginalisation*. That is, to expand its applicability as we strive to make a difference in our advocacy for the human rights of all victims of social injustices.

From the outset though, I wish to signal my preoccupation with some questions that never sit comfortably with me, even as I submit to finding strategies that apparently win hearts and shift minds!!

Questions that want to expose and name underlying root causes, systemic forces, and systematic tools, such as power, dominance, privilege, and the norm. Questions that want to know why people hold the attitudes they have and behave in the ways that they do? Sometimes it is hard to imagine that we are all on the same planet when our views and positions on issues of injustice are so at odds with one another.

‘Words That Work’ did not just emerge out of thin air – for the inquisitive minds among us, it is natural to ask the question: What is it that we are reacting or responding to when we create tools such as this? And it is not far-fetched to conclude that there is a dominant narrative and driving force that necessitates such strategic responses.

In the specific case of refugees and asylum seekers we are resorting to strategies such as WTW because we hope that non-confrontational approaches may speak to the hearts

and minds of a majority/dominant population whose passive or active consent has led to immigration policies that are discriminatory, racist and oppressive – policies that are harmful (directly/indirectly) for migrants particularly refugees and people seeking asylum.

We incorporate personal stories and narratives in our strategies. We draw on moral principles and imperatives, and ultimately on relational and inter-social exposure to finally get the message across that we are talking about actual people. We are talking about and fighting for human beings, not just statistics, not just faceless labels such as refugees and asylum seekers, but persons just like us. Humans! Persons! With the same aspirations, dreams and hopes for themselves and their families and loved ones. It just seems so bizarre to me that we ‘have to’ *humanise* humans... it is what it is but still...

It is not just empathy we are aiming for. It is also the case that underneath all that is the ‘fear’ that today it is ‘them’ who are the victims of such inhumanities, but tomorrow it may just be ‘us’. And if that happens, we want to be assured that others will help us too, to keep us safe. It should not be so hard, but it truly is such hard work just to get to that point of realisation and self-consciousness!

We know that the dominant narrative has been used and continues to be used to diminish, subjugate, silence, mislead, and agitate folks. Indeed, to produce rationales for not caring, for being indifferent, for maintaining the status quo. It is precisely because that dominant narrative is so successful that we are here talking about WTW strategies; that we are forced to seek ways around the depressing socio-political conditions and discourses created by this narrative. We need to become somewhat subversive, to be like an underground resistance movement working to counter actions and policies that diminish the humanity and dignity of peoples on the basis of their migrant status, their religion, ethnicity, race, and/or sexual orientation. We resort to such measures to try and transform the status quo!

And yet, at the end of all that effort, there is still no guarantee that we have rid society of such systemic and structural injustices. So that for example, we cannot be so naïve to expect that systemic and structural racism will suddenly disappear because WTW strategies seem to be working. As mentioned in the group discussions the fear of migrants coming in to ‘take our jobs’ has not changed, but there seem to be consensus that indefinite family separation is unfair. At times, it feels that the disproportionate effort for such minimal returns is really about celebrating small mercies!

So now that I have painted such a dismal picture, let us talk about some creative and life-giving strategies that may help in our effort to win hearts and shift minds!!

I want to reiterate that seeking strategic tools of communication by appealing to personal narratives that foster relationships of trust, to common values that create a

common vision for a life of dignity and meaning for all human persons, is not novel amongst Christian activists and advocates for social justice. Further, that the goal of such Christian and church activities for social justice always prioritise concerted efforts and action to make a difference in the lives of those denied such dignity and meaning in their lives.

WTW resonates with me precisely because the values it espouses are values that I as a Christian would call Christian values. It is fair to say that WTW as a tool is utilising in more secular circles what Christian activists and theologians like myself have been using for years in our ministries to speak to the hearts and minds of people about social justice and human rights as biblical and gospel imperatives.

In a nutshell, the theological framing of how we talk and speak about each other is in fact integral to the nature of Christian discipleship. It is integral to our Christian calling to live and witness to the gospel values of love, compassion, justice and peace! And it is a calling that any self-respecting and self-proclaimed follower of Jesus Christ takes seriously.

Pauline theology articulates this calling in terms of clothing oneself with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, peace, thankfulness, wisdom and above all love – love that binds everything together in perfect harmony. (*Colossians 3:12-17 (NRSV)*) This is what it means for Christians to live justly. Throughout the Bible there is a recurring call for God's people to live justly (*Gen18:19, Amos 5:21, Micah 6:8, Ps82:3-4*). The biblical concept of *imago Dei* (of humankind being created in the image of God) provides the ontological grounding for human rights which purely secular accounts lack. The notion of inherent human value in Western civilisation arose out of the belief that every human being is formed in the image of God.

For us Christians this means we are obligated to treat every human being as a person of worth with a right to be treated justly (*Gen1:27*) as well as a responsibility to care for the earth (*Gen2:15*). Indeed, social justice is integral to life in the Kingdom of God, is in fact evidence of God's reign, and is a dominant theme in the ministry of Jesus who expressed the nature of his ministry in terms of bringing good news to the poor, and releasing the captives (*Lk4:18-19*). Jesus' summary of the commandments to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind... and love your neighbour as yourself' (*Matt23:23*) is a profound statement for social justice, and as Micah declared: *'He has told you, oh mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.'* (*6:8*)

And yet... we are talking about the very word, the very book, that has been employed over the centuries, and to this very day, as a weapon of both mass deception and mass destruction. This is the entry point for **'Unsettling the Word'** (UTW) as a strategic example of how to counter the power of dominant narratives to construct a reality that a

whole nation, a whole generation assumes to be true.¹ It is also a demonstration of the unsettling power of the word of God to both empower and destroy.

The renowned early 20th century African American sociologist and activist, WEB Dubois, and co-founder of the National Assoc for the Advancement of Coloured People, responded to the deafening silence of the white church in the face of overwhelming black pain with the question: ‘Who is the God that such a church sees and worships?’ ‘How do these white Christians read their Bible?’

This led to his strategy to redeploy the Biblical text and revision the ‘word’ into his current environment in a fresh new way - what he called ‘the word made fresh’. Dubois boldly reimagined the ancient stories of the Bible to offer a word of freedom for his time and for his people. This was Dubois’ biblical strategy for speaking truth to power.

Such experiences and the fact that the word of God has been used and continues to be used as a tool of colonialism, xenophobia, exclusion and cultural genocide led many theologians to follow Dubois’ example and to re-read the sacred text in creative and critical fashion, speaking fresh words into our world today, hence the ‘Unsettling the Word’ (UTW)project.

The UTW vision is that the re-reading of the word may ‘stir the hearts and lovingly unsettle the minds’ of people so that they are moved to ‘works of mercy, risks of solidarity, and costly acts of reparative love.’ In short, the Bible must be lived and experienced as radical and prophetic justice or it is an irrelevant and dead word. (UTW xvii)

The very humorous and accurate summary of Christian imperialism that is a common experience of Indigenous peoples around the world is noted thus:

When the missionaries arrived, we had the land and they had the Bible. They taught us how to pray with our eyes closed. When we opened them, the missionaries had the land and we had the Bible.

While for many of us it would be ideal to reverse the reality of that statement, it is through a critical appropriation of the word and a fearless re-reading of the text through the eyes of the exploited that the Bible can truly be a holy non-violent tool in today’s struggles for justice. (UTW xviii)

In addition to the critical re-reading of the text, UTW is an impetus for practical strategies that include contextual Bible studies which pay attention to and openly engage with contested traditions, competing theologies and ideologies. That means not shying away from the difficult biblical texts. The studies are followed by inter-social activities such as ‘who is coming to dinner’ evenings, games and quiz nights, socio-cultural nights, picnics at the beach and team sports in the park, singing and choir groups and so on. These will culminate in a visit to a remote Indigenous community, or to a mosque, or to a women’s

¹ Heinrichs, S, ed., *Unsettling the Word*, Canada: Mennonite Church, 2018

shelter, or whatever is prioritised as a social justice exposure/experience for the community.

These strategies presuppose an understanding of the church, the body of Christ, the faith community as a place where lives and relationships are rooted in gospel values (mentioned above) and that wherever the church exists, it ought to model what it means to be Christ's just and inclusive community of faith.

In more secular terms:

Imagine a world founded on equality of respect for all persons. In such a world, every society will be places where no one has to be deprived of or beg for the basic necessities of life, where women can walk the streets without fear of molestation, where employees' views are welcomed by employers, where immigrants and refugees are not shunned and exploited, where the elderly and people with disability have a voice in the affairs of the community...

We can dream that the more people who think this way the more possibility we have of finding a common vision to which people can aspire, for which people are willing to make sacrifices; a vision that can transform present action and interprets it in terms of future possibilities...

And we can pray...

Come Holy Spirit, speak your word anew, that we may be moved! Amen!

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