

Social Justice, Public Profile and Positive Outcomes

April 2022

If your brother or sister sins against you, go to them. Tell them what they did wrong. Keep it between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them back. But what if they won't listen to you? Then take one or two others with you. Scripture says, 'Every matter must be proved by the words of two or three witnesses.' But what if they also refuse to listen to the witnesses? Then tell it to the church. And what if they refuse to listen even to the church? Then don't treat them as a brother or sister. Treat them as you would treat an ungodly person.

Matthew 18:15-17

The above Gospel passage is consistent with the way the JIM Cluster pursues its work. The Cluster works from the principle of love of all people – neighbours and 'enemies'. The implication of this principle is that JIM seeks the well-being of all people. It aims to understand all people on their own terms, even if it ends up disagreeing with them. JIM avoids vilifying and misrepresenting those it disagrees with. It avoids tactics, where possible, that are about power over other people. It seeks to obtain the best possible just outcome rather than 'winning' through imposing our will on others. It is open to reconsider a solution being pursued based on new information.

In our campaigning work for reform, after the Synod and its members agree on a just outcome to an issue of injustice, the decision maker or decision makers are then approached for dialogue. If the decision maker agrees to work towards the outcome the work becomes supporting them in the implementation. If the decision maker refuses to support the outcome, the outcome is re-evaluated against the reasons for the decision makers' opposition. The outcome may be modified or the original intention may be pursued.

A plan is then established based on what actions are likely to persuade the decision maker to agree to implement the just solution. Contextual consideration is also given to what is most likely to ensure the solution will have durability. The plan is very different if a decision maker would like to implement the solution but needs a show of support from the community to do so compared to if the decision maker is ideologically committed to inflicting harm and suffering on people.

The above methodology for campaigning has led to disappointment for some members of the church who would prefer to see the Uniting Church having a higher public profile, especially through mainstream media. It is the experience of the Cluster that persuading a decision maker to change their views on an issue and own the just outcome leads to more meaningful and lasting reform. Persuasion normally best occurs through dialogue and exposing the decision maker to the lived experience of people they may have ignored or dismissed. When a person is persuaded to change their beliefs and actions, it is likely to be more durable. When a decision maker is coerced to change their actions on the basis of public shaming there is a higher risk they will revert to their previous behaviour as soon as the coercive pressure is lifted.

The world is divided into people who do things and people who get the credit. Try, if you can, to belong to the former. There's far less competition.

Dwight Morrow, US Ambassador to Mexico 1927-1930

Persuasion and Lasting Outcomes

What will be effective to persuade a decision maker to change is highly contextual on that decision maker. The use of public shaming of a decision maker through mainstream media carries higher risk the decision maker will dig-in with their existing position if the public shaming fails to persuade them. As organisational psychologist Professor Adam Grant writes in his book 'Think Again':

This is a common problem in persuasion: what doesn't sway us can make our beliefs stronger. Much like a vaccine inoculates our physical immune system against a virus, the act of resistance fortifies our psychological immune system. Refuting a point of view produces antibodies against future influence attempts. We become more certain of our opinions and less

curious about alternative views. Counterarguments no longer surprise or stump us – we have our rebuttals ready.

Effective persuasion often means a process of dialogue with the decision makers. For that dialogue to be meaningful, trust needs to be built so that honest conversations can be had. A decision maker will not disclose what they are really thinking or wrestling with if they think the conversation may end up on the website of a media outlet straight after a meeting.

That is not to say there is never a role for mainstream media. Media can be very useful to highlight a situation of injustice and bring it to public attention. It can help build public support for reform. Also there are decision makers who are unlikely to ever be swayed in private dialogue or by letter-writing campaigns, where public critique is the only option to try and change their actions.

Mainstream Media and the Churches

Churches face a number of difficulties in obtaining coverage in mainstream media. Long gone are the days when churches could make public statements and they would be regarded as news. Space in mainstream media needs to be earned. Churches can get mainstream media coverage when:

- The issue is particularly relevant to the lives of members of the church, such as sexual abuse within the church;
- When the churches can reflect the lived experience of people they work with, such as the lived experience of people accessing community services run by churches;
- When the churches demonstrate they have done significant research on an issue and have become 'experts' in the field; and
- The churches take a hard-line or quirky position or action on an issue.

On the last point, increasingly media outlets look for comments from those that hold positions at the extremes of an issue. There is a view from many media outlets that the extreme views will attract more viewers and readers than nuanced views that express the complexities of issues. The Cluster has had the experience of not finding its way into media stories because it was not willing to provide comments at one extreme of an issue. The JIM Cluster held to the view that the role of the churches is to acknowledge the complex realities of many situations while maintaining the theological vision of the Uniting Church.

It needs to be acknowledged that many journalists would like to be able to thoroughly explore issues. However, there is a decreasing number of journalists that are given the time to do thorough investigative journalism, with media outlets increasingly responding to the immediate 24/7 news cycle that drowns out nuance and complexity.

Churches find it hard to gain mainstream media space on issues that are seen as being outside their field of expertise or relevance. For example, it is completely reasonable to a journalist to feel it is more appropriate to seek comment on climate change from the head of a dedicated environmental organisation than from the head of a church.

From a JIM Cluster perspective, sometimes media coverage would lead to a worse outcome. For example, the Cluster had a case where an employer on the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme that planned to make a pregnant woman from the Pacific Islands homeless. The situation could have been easily used to get a mainstream media story to shame the employer. Instead the Cluster and the Salvation Army negotiated with the employer. As a result, the employer not only then agreed to allow the woman to stay in the employer provided accommodation, but to provide it rent free and to pay for her private health insurance. From conversation with the employer, the positive outcome seemed far less likely if media had been engaged to shame the employer.

Despite the Uniting Church having much more engagement and knowledge of the PALM scheme through congregations supporting workers on the program, mainstream media has largely given profile to those with little contact with workers who make false allegations of slavery on the scheme.

The way to get things done is not to mind who gets the credit for doing them. – Rev Benjamin Jowett