

The Sea of Faith (NZ) Archives

A brief account of how the Archive has developed and how it works.



Alison Eng

The Macmillan Brown Library is the University of Canterbury's research collection of New Zealand and Pacific Islands materials. It holds an extensive collection of documentary archives, filling over 4000 linear metres of shelf space, less than 3 metres of which are the Archive of Sea of Faith New Zealand. These written records of what we've thought and said and done are all tucked up safely in waxed and acid-free archive boxes, sitting on shelves in a temperature-controlled warehouse, and should be there long after you and I have ceased to have any interest in them. Our twentieth conference is a time to look back as well as forward, so today I'd like to take a peek inside those boxes to give you a glimpse of the past and remind you of what it is that has drawn you here this weekend.

It was 1998 when I responded to a request in the Newsletter and became the Sea of Faith's archivist. Soon the cartons of papers began to arrive.....many, many cartons of papers. I should confess that I'm a librarian by training, not an archivist, so there ensued a certain amount of panic as I worked out what to keep and what to biff, how to organize what I kept, and, most importantly, how to get it all out of my house. There was some agonising over where the collection should be stored, but finally the Steering Committee decided to gift it to the University of Canterbury's Macmillan Brown Library where, at no cost to us, it is expertly cared for. The documents can be used in the library by Sea of Faith members, University staff and students and other genuine researchers. However if you're travelling through Christchurch and have a sudden and overwhelming urge to inspect the Archive you will be disappointed. What you need to do is anticipate the urge and contact the library well before your trip, as items always need to be requested in advance. Unfortunately having our documents cared for in a way that preserves their longevity means they're not instantly available and the retrieval process takes time. I've been told that even the weather affects when they can be moved from the warehouse to the library, so a certain amount of patience is required.

Within the Archive documents are organized in groups – Conferences, Steering Committee, AGM's, Local Groups, Resource Centre, Newsletters, Correspondence and Miscellaneous items. The original collection was deposited in 2000. I now gather relevant documents and deposit them as Supplements to that original collection at 5-yearly intervals. In line with accepted

archive practice only paper documents are archived, so anything valuable on disk must be copied. And most importantly, I record and describe each item in an Inventory, so I know exactly what we have and where it's located within the collection. It's an invaluable tool which helps me answer queries, often without having to view the documents themselves. There is a copy of the Inventory on the website – unabridged as yet, so it looks rather complicated. My next task is to make it much more user friendly.

So what will we find in these archive boxes? Are they merely factual accounts of what has happened over the last 20 years? Yes, they certainly are that, and they have to be, because that record is important. But they are also more than that. I believe they convey something less tangible but more important, something about the fundamental nature and purpose of the Sea of Faith. So today, in addition to informing you about the scope and nature of the collection, I want to highlight some of the more interesting bits, some of the comments, stories and statements that do reveal what's at the heart of the Network and what motivates us to be part of it.

Let's start with the Local Groups box. This is actually the least comprehensive part of the entire archive. A list from 1996 indicates that as many as 29 groups operated at that time but we have full records for Auckland, Christchurch and Dunedin only. Smaller groups who may meet less often and more informally are not well represented in the Archive, but they are just as important as the groups in larger centres, and I can't emphasise strongly enough how valuable it is for us to have a record of their activities.

There's no doubt that local gatherings have always been important. I'd like to read from a letter written in 1993 which describes one couple's feelings on joining a local group:

"We both find it far more refreshing to our faith to be able to explore areas such as the virgin birth, the resurrection, the interpretation of the Bible etc. without feeling that there are people who are not able to cope with our need to enquire and explore...we can... search... for the answers to our questions - not worrying whether it is too 'liberal' or 'heretical' to do such a thing, but being excited that we are able to take the risk – and we feel that is where real faith is – in being able to take risks, not in feeling secure or assured..."

Among the records of the Dunedin group is a little booklet that resulted from precisely this sort of risky sharing of ideas. It's a reprint of 15 contributions to a meeting in July 2004 when people were invited to speak for 2 minutes on What I believe, with the clear assurance that no one will be challenging what you say – everything will be accepted. You will not be under any pressure...

And so we have statements like this one:

My faith came alive when I came to the realization that god was not a creature bounding around in a cosmos of infinity before time ever was, and immortal. I believe all gods are man made....I believe that this life is all we shall experience, its as good as it is going to be. If I take this



seriously, and I feel I should, it follows that I need to understand that it thrusts upon me, some pretty serious responsibilities I need to consider as I live my time out in this world with my fellow travellers.

Local Sea of Faith groups, as well as our national conferences, are indeed, to quote from a Dunedin Newsletter, "a safe place in which to talk about unsafe things."

Boxes of Conference documents make up about half of our Archive and we have an excellent record of what happened at most conferences. Keynote addresses are all there, as well as things like Arrangements Committee records, programmes, registration lists, venue matters, the organization of workshops, core and focus groups, elective lectures and field trips, budget and finance records, correspondence and conference evaluation surveys. There's a good selection of this material in the Archive Display that is set up in the Atrium, and I hope some of you will drop by to look at it and talk further.

There's not a lot from the first conference in Hamilton in 1993, but one treasure is a list of the names and addresses of the nearly 200 participants. You'll find many familiar names there - people who were active in the Network's early days and people you've shared conferences with, some of whom are no longer with us.

We also have the first programme - keynote speakers were Lloyd Geering, Betsan Martin and Neville Glasgow. Seventeen workshops included

- ***Do we Experience a God-shaped hole? A workshop for those who "miss" God***, by Marion Blackbourn;
- ***Bride of Christ - abandoned wife? Is the life of the church redeemable?*** By Jim Cunningham;
- ***Is there life after the Sea of Faith Conference? An opportunity to work with practical suggestions for continuing faith exploration locally***, by Ian Harris.

From the second conference in 1994, also held in Hamilton, we have a copy of a fax we sent to Don Cupitt at the close of the conference. Part of it reads:

Greetings from some 240 people gathered here in Hamilton for the 2nd Sea of Faith Network Conference, where there has been frequent reference to you and also to Anthony Freeman. There are now over 500 people throughout N.Z. who are linked with the Sea of Faith by the newsletter. We all send our very warm good wishes to you and Susan and rejoice to hear you are feeling much better.

Interesting incidents and stories pop up occasionally in the Conference records and here and there are humorous touches. I love the email from a prospective keynote speaker that began with



Good morning Frank,

My wife has given the OK. So I will be delighted to come and serve as your keynote speaker...

Here's the story of the cloth bags that you may spot around the conference this weekend. The first batch of bags date back to the 11th conference in Inglewood in 2003, when a hard-working member of the Arrangements Committee purchased the calico, washed it and cut out 220 bags. These were then made up by the local Norfolk Primary School PTA for 50 cents a bag. A logo was designed, with a vector image costing \$40, screen printing completed in New Plymouth, and finally all 220 bags were ironed and filled with conference materials. The bags must have been a success as a further 200 were made the following year and maybe even more since. Some of us are lucky enough to be still using them at conferences, and rumour has it that they can also be seen doing useful service in trolleys at New Plymouth Pak n' Save!

Another story I like is from 2002 when the Dunedin group helped with arrangements for the conference in Timaru. Accommodation at the Craighead Diocesan School boarding house apparently didn't include bedding and much thought went into how to keep people warm on chilly South Canterbury nights. Arrangements Committee meetings routinely included a "Duvet Report", and eventually it was decided that duvets would be hired in Dunedin and then transported the two hour trip to Timaru on a trailer that could carry 96 duvets per load. One can only try to envisage a small, single-axle trailer being trundled up to Timaru with 96 duvets on board!

The information gathered from conference evaluation surveys reveals largely what you'd expect from the people of mature years (that is the 96% of us over 45) who attend conferences. We offer bouquets like;

- *Bookstore excellent*
- *Food unfortunately irresistible*
- *...friendliness & good humour*
- *Excellent red wine*
- *Everything – enjoyed the whole time & I go home feeling enlarged*

And brickbats like:

- *No real coffee*
- *Cask wine unacceptable*
- *Cold showers*
- *Music too loud*
- *Lack of porridge for breakfast*

While three of the best recommendations for future conferences that I found were:

- *Always have a slot for Lloyd*

- *Could Saturday night last longer?*
- *Name labels need the name as large as possible – it is always gratifying to be recognised from a distance, rather than to have one's bosom peered at!*

A glance through the Correspondence and Miscellaneous Box yields a number of interesting documents. There's information on our Constitution, our membership, the structure and rules under which we operate, discussion papers on various aspects of the Network and a file of newspaper cuttings..... to name just a few.

The item I've chosen to tell you about is the transcript of an ABC Compass programme that had been recorded at the Timaru Conference in 2002 and was screened in Australia the following year. Keynote speaker Stephen Batchelor who is a Buddhist scholar, Don Cupitt, Lloyd Geering and two Sea of Faith members took part in a wide-ranging discussion about the Network, fundamentalism and the decline in religion. The transcript makes interesting reading, as does the related correspondence.

In a series of letters written between June 2003 and April 2004 the Steering Committee made every effort to have the programme screened by TVNZ. The initial response was evasive and non-committal, with comments like

"it is increasingly important that we pay attention to what our viewers are saying",

but no action. The debate broadened as Noel Cheer who was writing on our behalf, continued the battle for

"programmes...to show the multitude of ways in which New Zealanders express (or decline to express) religious faith. We in the Network have high hopes that a shift in programming as suggested by your charter might yield programmes that deal with the moral/ethical/religious aspect of the life of New Zealanders in a way that has been missing from our screens for many years but which viewers in Britain and Australia presently enjoy".

He suggested the rebroadcasting of the initial BBC Sea of Faith tapes and programming other relevant interviews to mark the 20th anniversary of the original broadcasts in the UK. One letter found its way to the producer of Praise Be, but once again the response was that his comments were important but there was no action. Noel responded

"...alas, it will do our cause little good to be associated with Praise Be....however charming a programme that may be. We hope that there will emerge a unit within TVNZ that will be adequately resourced to address matters of religious and ethical concern with some intellectual bite. The BBC manages, ABC in Australia also. There's a challenge for TVNZ."

Minutes of meetings, both AGM's and Steering Committee, fill several archive boxes. AGM's begin with 1994 but refer to a 1993 foundation meeting, the minutes of which I would very



much like to get my hands on. And I'm still looking for any Steering Committee records prior to January 1996, so if anyone here can help with these I'd be most grateful.

Among the general Steering Committee documents one item foreshadows the technological changes which have occurred over the last 20 years, and which created a bigger challenge than anything else I encountered in my work with the Archive.

Unsurprisingly this item was written by Noel Cheer, our current Webmaster, in October 1997, and entitled Towards a full World Wide Web Home Page for Sea of Faith Network (NZ); a Briefing to the Incoming Steering Committee. Noel patiently and clearly explained all about the internet, email, the world wide web, relevance, risks, affordability and sustainability. Some of us took to it immediately with infuriating enthusiasm – others of us were dragged along kicking and screaming. Unfortunately I was one of the latter.

Our family had been given someone's outdated Apple Mac and a teenage son had organised an internet connection and email address. I suspect these were largely for his own use, and he was more than a little put out when the deluge of emails that began to fill my Inbox daily far exceeded those in his. But I began to panic. Were these to be treated as letters? Or were they just a kind of conversation? Some were only a couple of lines with no substance at all. Others addressed serious issues and conveyed important information. Should they be printed and filed? All of them or just some, and which ones? And how and to whom should I respond? Copying in was taken seriously, and suddenly it seemed I was getting everything anyone sent to anyone, and interesting though it all was I felt I was drowning in the Sea of Faith! It took some years, not only for me to figure out how the whole business worked, but to put in place manageable and sensible systems for this new way of communicating. At the time I thought I was going through these technological trials and tribulations alone, but I realize others were frustrated too when I find emails like the following:

This is my first message to you all on my reformatted computer, so if this doesn't work "Hit any key to continue" will see me going out to the shed to get the biggest bloody hammer I can find.

The final archive box contains Resource Centre documents and a complete run of our wonderful Newsletter – undoubtedly the best reflection of the Network and what it holds dear.

Newsletter No 12, July 1995 records that:

Suzi Thirlwell... manages a resource centre of books, tapes (audio and visual) and any other material for use in discussion by SOFN members and groups...

But we know from a letter making the first request for material that Suzi was working hard 6 months earlier. About that time Lloyd Geering donated a collection of his own tapes and St Andrew's Trust booklets that must have formed the foundation of the Resource Centre

collection. The Archive has the letter and list that accompanied this donation, as well as Suzi's regularly published Audio/Visual Resource Lists.

Newsletter No 1, November 1992, edited by Lloyd Geering was where Sea of Faith New Zealand all started. Let me quote from the first page Lloyd wrote. They're familiar words, but it seems appropriate that they be repeated at the beginning of this conference:

This comes to you because you placed your name recently on a list indicating your interest in the formation of a Network of people in New Zealand, who have similar interests to the Sea of Faith Network in UK [which] was formed in response to the BBC television documentary, presented by Don Cupitt...[who] urged that we should cease to mourn the decline and fall of traditional beliefs. Instead he offered a vision of a new, dynamic religious faith, entirely human, no longer depending on a supernatural origin, and centred in spiritual and ethical activity. The Sea of Faith Network...AFFIRMS the continuing importance of religious thought and practice as a vehicle for awe and wonder and for the celebration of key social and spiritual values; EXPLORES the implications of acceptance of religion as a human creation; PROMOTES a broader acceptance of the legitimacy and validity of creative, human-centred religion... The Sea of Faith Network has no creed. It draws its members from most of the major Christian churches and embraces men and women from other faiths and from those with no attachment whatever to religious institutions. It accommodates a similarly rich and diverse spread in the expression of spirituality. Many streams run into the Sea of Faith....like the sea itself, the Network is fluid, always moving, always changing....[It] has no fixed positions, no dogmas. It continually redefines itself and reformulates its attitudes, including, of course, those set out above.

This brings me to my final observation about our Archive, and this is that amongst the many names that appear in the records, some crop up time and time again. Everyone is acknowledged for the part they've played in our history, but a special few have been singled out with the award of Life Membership – Noel Cheer, Don Cupitt, Lloyd Geering, Alan Goss and Ian Harris.

While all have worked so hard, when we think of how we began, one name does stand out, and that's Lloyd's. Our Archive confirms that as the founding force and guiding hand of Sea of Faith New Zealand he has enriched our lives in the most profound way.

As we look back 20 years and forward as far as we dare I say a deeply heartfelt "Thank you" to Lloyd and I know this will be echoed by many here today as we head into another conference – a conference that will inspire, challenge and delight us, add yet more documents to those important archive boxes and another chapter to the history of Sea of Faith in New Zealand.

Alison Eng