

Learningguild Letter

2019

Dear members and friends of Learningguild,

In 2020 I intend to write at least several chapters of a book probably to be called *Reasoned Commitment*, and I shall welcome questions, comments and suggestions as I go. Why that subject and title, and why a book? Some of what follows will go, revised, into the first chapter or others.

I am using the word ‘commitment’ here as what I call an NU, a noun for something thought of as uncountable with that noun: it refers to a **disposition**, often long continuing, as ‘devotion’, ‘love’, ‘faith’ and ‘ambition’ commonly do. Its use is similar to that of ‘devotion’, but it does not itself connote the welcome involvement of emotions such as enthusiasm. We cannot always be enthusiastic about or devoted to what we have committed ourselves to do. All commitment (like all devotion?) needs a foundation in reasons, not just in emotions that might normally accompany it.

Let’s begin with a definition that uses the participle ‘committed’ and then consider what that means. ‘Commitment’ as an NU refers to the disposition of being committed to do or achieve, or aim to be, something that one regards as right or good. To be committed, in the relevant sense, is firmly to intend to go on giving oneself, and so one’s time and energy, as far as one judges to be needed or desirable, and practicable, in one’s situation, usually for some lengthy period, perhaps for life, to what one wants to do or achieve, or aims to be.

Such commitment needs to be reasonable, not unwarranted or foolish. Why not then *Reasonable Commitment*? First, the word ‘reasonable’, like ‘fair’ and ‘moderate’, often has a connotation, as in school reports, expressible by ‘not especially good’. Secondly, one can easily decide to accept a commitment someone else may have reasoned out without doing any reasoning oneself. I want to write about commitment one has thought out, reasoned out, for oneself, because it is a crucial feature of normal human beings that they can freely engage in such reasoning and make decisions on its basis. (What a wonderful thing that is!) Another cru-

cial feature is the capacity for healthy emotions, and one aim of the book, as of a serious person’s life, is to do justice to both reason and emotion.

Although the title, *Life is Commitment*, of a very impressive book by a Christian, J.H. Oldham (SCM 1953), is an unwisely exaggerated one, and a category mistake, I am sure he is right that a good life, or way of life, requires commitment, preferably, it needs to be added, in more than one area. How well he understands what commitment family and educational relationships require, and how far he is in fact from thinking too narrowly of one’s own commitment, appear in this rhetorical but thoughtful and grateful sentence (p.37):

What would I be if there had not been from the moment of my birth persons who loved me, nourished me, taught me, shared their life with me and made me what I am through what they were?

Near the end of my letter in the last issue I mentioned Kant’s illustration of an imagined ten-year-old boy as gaining through a true story a vivid appreciation of how a resolutely honest person can behave under extreme pressure. Is it true that the need for commitment begins at about ten and continues throughout life? At present there is justified concern about lack of mental health, especially but not only among young people. One can indeed become mentally ill through undertaking too much, and certainly (as with some young doctors in their year in a hospital after graduation?) by being required to work absurdly long hours. But mental unwellness or illness is sometimes the result of a lack of satisfaction or perceived meaningfulness in one’s life, whatever may have caused it. The absence of commitment can be a cause as well as a result.

The sentence just quoted would be even better if it included ‘encouraged me’. ‘You can do it if ...’ is often the best, most realistic and most needed form of encouragement from parent or teacher, inviting commitment and enthusiasm.

Oldham employs ‘commitment’ or a form of the verb three times in one sentence in the second paragraph of the Postscript.

I realized that what I had been saying throughout is that life is commitment – that one cannot live without committing oneself and that the more whole-heartedly one commits oneself the more one enters into the fullness of life

One **can** live without commitment. Oldham does not explain what commitment is, or deal with the questions how one is to decide what to commit oneself to, with what motivations, and how.

Examples observed or read about can be a spur to commitment and a revelation of what it can mean or involve. Consider the remark of his comrade Barry Jones about John Cain, former Premier of Victoria, who died in December 2019: “when he was committed to something he wouldn’t let anything stand in his way” (*The Age*, Dec. 24).

For a child or an undergraduate, commitment may come with excitement or be just noticed. I remember Bob Priestley, Assistant Dean of Arts at Melbourne, saying when I was a young lecturer (c. 1965) that it made a crucial difference when a student realized that he or she didn’t need to head for the disco on a Friday evening but could take up a book to be studied eagerly.

Why should I write a **book** on reasoned commitment? There are at least seven areas in which I want to pursue the theme. With caution about some of the words I use, I will indicate them by specifying morality, truth-seeking, vocation, sport, marriage or long-term partnership of a couple, politics, and religion.

I have long been concerned with Plato’s question “In what way should one live?”, prominent in the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*. Tantamount to it is the question “What kind of person am I to commit myself to seek to be?”. Both questions are, grammatically and existentially, **deliberative**. The fundamental moral choices, in the widest sense of the adjective ‘moral’, are between being selfish and being unselfish, unjust and just, hostile and friendly, loveless and loving. For most of us life involves partnerships and associations of various kinds, and one main push to face the ‘What kind of person ...?’ question is the realization that a human being can so easily become a nuisance or a burden or a worry, or an enemy, to another, or just indifferent.

Broadly moral questions arise in connection with all six of the other areas. It is astonishing how relevant to our own times is that dialogue the *Gorgias*. The respected orator Gorgias sees his success in persuading assemblies and individuals as a great good, but Socrates gets his concession that he and his audience alike

are ignorant of how things actually are (459b). Our young people in Victoria are no longer required to study “Clear Thinking” in Years 11 and 12, but rather to attend to the devices of persuasive writing.

The young man Polus is taken aback by Socrates’ view of some human activities as pandering to oneself, and of what we might call political advocacy as pandering to others. The question remains whether the serious and committed person needs to be a kind of ascetic, eager to be at his or her best most of the time. Polus also regards the Great King of Persia as a paradigm case of a person who is *eudaimōn*, worthy of an ultimate congratulation, and is amazed that Socrates’ criteria are justice and mental development (470e).

Callicles, Socrates’ third interlocutor, goes so far as to affirm that “luxury, no-moderation and freedom are excellence and *eudaimonia*” (492c). So the question arises for an adolescent or an older person “Am I to seek luxury and freedom from constraints?”. Suddenly Socrates introduces a Pythagorean ideal of “community and friendship and order and moderation and justice” (508a). How might that ideal, as well as truth-seeking on important questions, influence our choice of paid or unpaid employment and of activities after or outside it? Is there any useful application of the traditional word ‘vocation’? If we use the two words as abstract nouns, how well does Learningguild satisfy the criteria of community (*koinōnia*) and friendship (*philia*)?

How relevant are they to sport? They are incompatible with some of the ruthless ways people engage in it. What matters in sport? In which sports are we individually to commit ourselves to engage, and to what ends? In *Lg L* 1.2016 I offered the acronym ‘WRE’ and the watchword “Walking, running, exercises, for energy, health and delight”.

No discussion of marriage or committed long-term partnership can be satisfactory if it is not characterized by both realism and an awareness of how wonderful such a relationship can be, and still more so (in both aspects) if children are engendered or adopted. Respect for one’s partner, child or parent is fundamental, and so a readiness to learn and appreciate how they see things and often to change one’s own behaviour in the light of that.

The 19th-century British philosopher T.H.Green remains my main guide to political theory and practice. In the great lecture in Leicester in 1881, “Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract”, published in *Works* Vol. III, he says:

It is the business of the state ... to maintain the conditions without which a free exercise of the human faculties is impossible. (p.374)

And, in particular:

... it is the business of the state to take the best security it can for the young citizens' growing up in such health and with such knowledge as is necessary for their real freedom. (p.375)

Marian Sawer of ANU has demonstrated in her book *The Ethical State?* how influential that doctrine was on both sides of Australian politics in the hundred years that followed, and how little the same notes are sounded now.

Climate change requires resolute action, and in Australia we need to support the party or parties that are most clearly committed to it. The patronizing and dismissive waves to Greta Thunberg tell us about their makers rather than about her.

Commitment in relation to religion is in some ways more difficult to discuss than it would be otherwise if, as in my case, one's standpoint has changed. If for some or many years one has, for example, sincerely and appreciatively sung "All my hope on God is founded", but ceased to do so, it may not be easy (though not impossible) to explain, even to oneself, how and why that has happened.

One of Plato's great contributions and stimuli to philosophy is his recognition that often one has **assumptions** that are firmly held but need scrutiny to see if they really do stand up to objections and so are worthy to be regarded as first principles (*archai*). See *Republic* 509d-11e and 531d-4e, and, in Lee's revised Penguin edition of 2007, the introductory comments on p.263. An example of a religious holder of an absurd assumption is Euthyphro in the dialogue of that name. But this is no truism obvious to all. Such scrutiny encourages independent thought and criticism, and may therefore be unpopular and regarded as dangerous, even treacherous. I begin from the premise that religion is in need of such criticism, i.e., such careful evaluation. In my letter in this magazine's issue 2.2016, I advocated a hypothetico-deductive approach, rather than the merely appreciative and descriptive one of Huston Smith, valuable as his descriptions are. My view is not likely to be popular with many who are deeply sympathetic to other religions than their own, because they too want to be appreciative and descriptive, seeing that as a

corollary of respect and love, rather than to seem in any way antagonistic. The best path, I think, is to see one's thinking about religion, engaged in with attention to others' writing and remarks, as fundamentally a form of **enquiry** and preferably of enquiry gladly shared.

This has the implication that commitment to the practice and belief-system of a particular religion, or to the rejection of one or of all, is open to revision as one's enquiry proceeds. That deserves emphasis in contexts such as churches or schools within a religious tradition. In part it is a matter of mental health. To suppose that the religious tradition one has been brought in or adopted is part of one's essential identity is likely to occasion a kind of breakdown, or extreme anxiety, if one finds it no longer reasonable.

"That gives too much importance to reason", it may be replied. In his vivid and largely admirable autobiographical book *A Lot with a Little* (2019), Tim Costello writes in his preface

Faith creates meaning. It is faith that releases me to recognise that my primary desire is for my life to mean something. This is much more primal than even the pursuit of happiness. ... I believe we all need to commit ourselves to something bigger, beyond self-absorption.

He has certainly done so, with great benefit to many people in and beyond Australia.

'To mean something' is very vague. I would say 'to be valuable to others besides myself, and for both to employ and develop some of my capacities', and that does not depend on religious faith. To fulfil that desire normally requires a range of commitment, not just a single line of it. What, typically, does commitment typically require, in particular but representative areas? What are the dangers?

Commitment is not serious if the question of efficiency is not faced, and efficiency normally requires the devising and generally the following of a **pattern** of life that conduces to it, not with rigidity or detailed time-counting. Particularly when care for family members is prominent in one's responsibilities, but in any case, the pattern should allow for multi-tasking (e.g. revising a language as one puts out the washing) and for relaxation. It should be such that one can maintain it not anxiously or fanatically, but gladly, gratefully and humbly.

Yours in Learningguild,

John Howes

Finding parts of an identity

JULIAN FANG has a Master's degree from the University of Melbourne in development studies, and works as a cook at Kinfolk Café and a market manager for Melbourne Farmers' Markets. He gave a talk similar to this article at Learningguild's Sunday Meeting on September 15th.

I was selected as a Hamer Scholar for 2018 to study Mandarin at Sichuan University, which is at Chengdu in the province of Sichuan in western China. The Hamer Scholarship is designed to build the capabilities of Victorians for engagement with Asian countries, through a program of immersion in language and culture. My desire to learn Mandarin stems from an intention to explore a part of my identity that I felt was missing: I'm an Australian born Chinese who had never lived in China before my time in Chengdu from August 2018 to January 2019.

For most of my life hitherto I've been trying to assimilate to life in Australia, and it was not until the past few years that I've actively tried to familiarize myself with my heritage and learn more about Chinese culture. During my teenage years there was a short period when I was bored with weekend Mandarin classes. With hindsight, I wish I had learned Mandarin as a child, but at the time I didn't realise I would ever regard not having done so as something that would matter to me. Communication in many aspects of life including school, time with friends and competitive sport, required English; at family gatherings Cantonese was spoken. However, since moving to Melbourne from the Gold Coast in 2015, my increased exposure to Mandarin in daily life has contributed to my wanting to learn the language.

I had a very exciting time as a student at Sichuan University and I would recommend studying there to anyone wanting an enjoyable setting in which to learn Mandarin. Although the teachers there generally had a high level of English, classes were taught exclusively in Mandarin. They were divided into basic grammar and vocabulary, speaking, listening, reading and comprehension, and writing, with a different teacher for each class. Given my background knowledge of spoken Cantonese, I decided after the introductory week to skip the beginners' level classes, as I thought the next level would better suit my purpose to attain a "conversational" level of Mandarin whereby I would be comfortable in most social situations. I made this decision mindful that I only had a limited amount of time in which to achieve that, as I didn't plan to stay for longer than a semester.

In my new class I recall thinking to myself that the Chinese characters looked like a puzzle. I knew I needed to learn quickly, and this meant that I often found myself trying to recognize characters at every opportunity. One of my favourite ways to make use of spare time was to try and read each metro station name whilst I was waiting on the platform or travelling on a train. As time passed, I became more and more comfortable with my level of Mandarin and therefore began to think about opportunities to live and work in China as a way to reach a higher level.

My experience of life in Chengdu was full of new learnings not just about the Chinese language but also the culture, customs and lifestyle of modern-day China, which are in many ways different from those in Melbourne. I really enjoyed the Sichuanese food, so readily available in Chengdu. One of the most typical Chengdu practices is getting a group together and sharing a hot-pot meal: it can serve to welcome someone to the city, facilitate business interactions, or simply catch up with friends. I experienced my first mid-autumn festival and Lunar New Year within China, which was strange for me as I had tended to downplay the significance of those events in Australia. The lifestyle in Chengdu is highly regarded by many, as the infrastructure, public transport and technology are highly developed but there still remains a strong sense of culture and identity that serves to attract visitors from around the world.

I'm extremely grateful and proud to be a Hamer Scholar, and I believe that the program is fulfilling its aim of strengthening cultural awareness and partnerships between Victoria and Asian countries. As a result of spending a semester learning Mandarin in Chengdu, I'm already more comfortable with my identity as an Australian-born Chinese, and I've continued my study of Mandarin since returning to Melbourne. I'm confident I can live and work in either Australia or China, and I look forward to using Mandarin in future social and professional settings. Finally, I encourage anyone who is thinking about exploring his or her heritage: I have found doing so to be invaluable.

Australian education's neglect of languages

SOPHIE BRISSENDEN will be continuing an Arts course at the Australian National University in 2020. She and others have established a LitSoc there.

In 2017 I completed a unique course, “Language Policy and Planning”, taught by Dr Jennifer Hendricks and offered to undergraduate and graduate students at ANU. Dr Hendricks forewarned us that studying LPP would remove the rose-tinted spectacles that distort our view of the relationships between language, education, identity and society. This proved to be an understatement! She encouraged me to discover for myself that, in Australia, education in languages other than English is often deficient, mainly because of the monolingual mindset within which most Australians, including policy-makers, educators, students and their families, are trapped.

Australia boasts 401 individual languages, of which 186 are linguistically asleep and 215 awake, according to Australia’s Ethnologue webpage.¹ The 2016 census found that, for 27.3% of the country’s population, a language other than English (a LOTE) is spoken at home, and the number of immigrants choosing to maintain their mother tongue is rising.² Sitting in my local suburban shopping plaza, I hear conversations in five different languages. However, our nation’s diverse linguistic repertoire is not adequately reflected in the languages taught to primary and secondary students.

In a 2014 review, current second-language policy across Australia’s public education system is described by Timothy Curnow and Michelle Kohler as “fragmented” and “fragile” at best, even when one allows for the fact that education policy cannot be mandated nationwide. As of 2016, no high school student above Year 8 in any state or territory is obliged to study a second language and the time committed to LOTE learning before Year 8 is sparse. Instead the range and duration of language study offered is determined at the entire discretion of the principal of the institution.³

When we were pupils in public schools in Canberra, my peers and I rarely undertook optional second-language classes, because of inconsistency and limited availability. By contrast, I recently shared a house with a Dutch exchange student who finished the standard public school education of the Netherlands competent in six languages, a strong command of grammar and an open-mindedness towards the languages of other cultures. At ANU, taking a major in Ind-

igenous Studies, I wonder how it is possible that my thirteen years of Australian schooling never touched on the languages of our Aboriginal cultures nor properly engaged with any migrant language.

This state of affairs makes it easy to overlook the great efforts made by sociolinguists such as Joseph Lo Bianco in the 1980s towards multiculturalism and multilingualism. In the wake of the monolingual White Australia era, questions arose around the economic and cultural possibilities of language pluralism. These culminated in a 1984 report from a Senate Committee that advocated a national approach to languages. Lo Bianco’s *National Policy on Languages (NPL)* was released in 1987, a multifaceted policy which, Dr Hendricks said, was “the envy of language planners across the world”. When compared to the pre-1980 view of LOTEs, evidence suggests that Bianco’s *NPL* may have had some positive effect on their maintenance and expansion, but any change was short-lived.⁴

Education-related language policies of the last three decades have distanced the Australian learning environment from LOTEs. *NPL* was soon superseded in 1991 by Education Minister John Dawkins’s *The Australian Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP)*, replacing the plural ‘Languages’ with the singular ‘Language’ in the policy title. Later programs like *Literacy for all* (1998) and NAPLAN (2008), despite labelling EFL students (those studying English as a further language) as the most “at risk”, have benchmarks for English skills that significantly advantage Australian-born English-mother-tongue students with a “typical” cultural heritage. A variety of myths about bilingual education are the key motivators behind this shift in the Australian education system.

One myth is the misconception that learning a second language (either a LOTE or English itself) should take a student no more than two years. A second is that an education committed to a LOTE will inhibit a student’s learning of English. Many scholars have disproved both.⁵

They arise from Australia’s monolingual mindset. English has grown across the world to become a lingua franca through colonisation and globalisation. People born and raised in English-dominated countries such as

Australia are likely to interact with the world only through one language, English, and expect all other individuals to do the same. If your only tool is a hammer, everything must be a nail.

Politics has made it immensely difficult to bring about wide-ranging change. In addition, most primary and secondary students are themselves powerless in this area. I agree with Dr Hendricks that undergraduate second-language education should be strengthened in many of the country's tertiary institutions. The University of Canberra, where a bachelor's degree can be gained in education, does not offer a language program at all. This means that prospective teachers are not equipped with skills in bilingual education. At ANU, there are few degrees that take into consideration an applicant's knowledge of a language other than English. John Howes tells me that Melbourne used normally to require a language for entry to an Arts course. My Dutch friend had to speak English and French to get into her local university. Improving the position of LOTEs at universities will affect major Australian perspectives and policies that underlie and often inhibit second language education.

I would like to see my peers, friends and family challenging the Australian monolingual mindset in their day-to-day lives. University-based clubs that value and advocate acquaintance with more than one language could meet for discussions of members' language experiences and local language policy. Australians outside university circles should be open to expanding their range of languages used in daily conversation and in casual reading of newspapers and

magazines. The television channel NITV provides free access to programs broadcast in Indigenous Australian languages. I am certain that individual choices such as these, which harness the multilingualism that exists within Australia's multicultural communities, can make reform of educational policy on languages a real possibility. I shall continue to recommend Dr Hendricks's LPP course to other students.

NOTES

1. Simons, G. F. & Fennig, C. D. 2017. *Australia* [Online]. Dallas, Texas: SIL International. Available: <https://www.ethnologue.com/country/AU> [Accessed 7th November 2017].
2. Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2016. Australia (C) (Statistical Local Area), Language, top responses (other than English) [Online]. Online: Australian Bureau of Statistics. Available: http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/036?open document#cultural [Accessed 7th November 2017]
3. Curnow, T. J. & Kohler, M. 2014. Attachment 1: Policy and Literature Review Senior Secondary Languages Education Research Project. Research Centre for Languages and Cultures, University of South Australia.
4. Joseph Lo Bianco remains an active writer on Australian language policy. He collaborated with Yvette Slaughter in 2009 to produce the very valuable "Second Languages and Australian Schooling", published by ACER and available free online.
5. There are too many studies of this kind to list here. The writings of Lucy Tse, Bernard Spolsky and Terrence Wiley are particularly good.

A Chinese student's experience of English syllabuses

We welcome as members of Learningguild Hanxue Lv and Peirong Wu, who are Master's students in education at Southwest University at Beibei, near Chongqing. They are supervised by another member of Learningguild, Associate Professor Xin Zhao (see Lg L 2017 and 2018), in Melbourne for a year in 2016-17. Here PEIRONG WU responds to a question I put to her: "Have the syllabuses of English, in your experience of them, kept the right balance between the reading of novels and the study of sentence-construction?". Others' responses welcome. JH

For me, the syllabuses of English haven't kept the right balance. With a schoolteacher who stuck to traditional syllabuses of English, I learned a lot of grammar by being taught to analyse sentence-construction. I learned to identify subjects and predicates, verbs and objects, attributive clauses, adverbial clauses, object clauses and other contributors to sentence-patterns, and was taught the functions of these elements and how they combine to make a correct sentence, and so on.

However, I can read only one sentence at a time, not a paragraph, let alone an article or a novel. I can understand the meaning of a sentence and even translate it precisely into Chinese, but I cannot readily grasp the relation between different sentences in a paragraph. I haven't yet developed the skill of being able to read and "take in" a large group of sentences continuously and thoughtfully without translating them into Chinese.

A Christian understanding of faith

SANDY YULE is a retired minister of the Uniting Church in Australia. He is a leading member of the Australian Student Christian Movement.

I understand the word ‘faith’, in a religious context, to refer primarily to a commitment to a covenanted (or quasi-covenanted) relationship. Such a relationship is constituted where two parties enter into a specified one on the basis of mutual promises, implicit as well as explicit. Our established idea of marriage is a normative example of a covenanted relationship. “Keeping faith” between husband and wife is quite well understood. This faith can be broken when explicit or implicit promises are not fulfilled. There is content to the relationship through the promises and expectations. There is mutuality through the fact that commitment is needed from both parties to it. In our everyday understanding, we recognise the role of promises, explicit or implicit, in building relationships in which expectations of each other legitimately exist.

I understand ‘Christian faith’ to refer to faith in Christ, to which much of the New Testament invites us all. This is an invitation into a covenanted relationship between people (both individually and collectively) and God, as seen to be specially present in Jesus of Nazareth, the Risen Christ. There are beliefs involved, such as the reality of the man Jesus and the somewhat different reality of God, but the primary meaning of faith in this context refers to our commitment to an open and trusting relationship. Departure from the faith is therefore a turning away from this relationship, perhaps choosing to close ourselves against it, or perhaps deciding (or recognizing?) that our doubts concerning the reality of God no longer allow us to hold to the possibility of such a relationship.

Faith is therefore not to be identified with the holding of specific beliefs, such as those expressed in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. Such beliefs articulate and allow us to enact faith. They open an invitation to faith and provide a form in which Christian faith has traditionally been expressed, but they do not provide the essence of faith, which is the covenantal relationship itself. Credal beliefs express central aspects of it, but it is not to be thought of as completely coterminous with what these beliefs express. A form of Christian faith can co-exist with thorough-going metaphysical

doubt concerning any particular interpretation of what may or may not exist on the other end of the relationship, provided that there is continuing openness to whatever this might be, as well as an active fulfilling of that to which our end of the relationship commits us.

Christian faith is more plausibly identified with a fundamental trust in God, as the emphasis is on the relationship and not on propositions that describe and articulate it. Yet even here I would reject a complete identification of faith with trust. In life, we trust what we deem to be trustworthy. Where trust has been betrayed, we rightly withhold trust in future situations, requiring a fuller basis for trust. Yet faith is a relationship involving mutuality, so that we are not only to look at what we expect and trust to receive from the other, but also at what we are required to do because of the nature of the relationship. Our expectations of God arise within this relationship. When our expectations are disappointed, we may find that they have been unrealistic, or otherwise ill-advised. Yet such disappointments occur within the relationship, as we see in the example of Job, commended for faithfulness to it because of his long challenge to God.

Faith involves commitment, which in turn requires active choice, both in the initiation of the relationship and in its outworking. This is another reason why faith should not be identified with belief, as belief should follow the evidence, or even with trust, which refers to our expectations of our covenant partner, without acknowledging our own committed responsibilities. There is a mutuality in a relationship based upon faith, which requires conscious choice and commitment, both in receiving the promised participation of the other and in maintaining our own promised participation. Departure from Christian faith can therefore be understood as a withdrawal of the necessary commitment. This can be a fully conscious choice or it can be a matter of drift, barely recognised as departure. The maintenance of Christian faith is an ongoing matter of living out this relationship, preferably in an open and questioning spirit.

Femili PNG: from Lae to Port Moresby

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In an earlier article (1.2016) “Tackling gender-based violence in PNG”, I wrote about the Papua New Guinean NGO Femili PNG, which I have been supporting since its inception. Having started in mid-2014, it works with survivors of gender-based violence, helping them to obtain the services they need.

When I wrote that article, Femili PNG was still operating in just one city, Lae, PNG’s second largest, on the northern coast. A lot has changed since 2016, but the biggest change for us has been expansion in 2018 from Lae to Port Moresby, the nation’s capital. We have doubled our staff and the number of clients we see, and have had to learn to work as a national rather than a local organisation.

The Port Moresby operation is structured very differently from the Lae one. The latter is supported primarily by Australian aid, with additional support from donations, but Port Moresby’s is a public-private partnership. The logic behind the involvement of private businesses is not only philanthropic but also commercial. Gender-based violence is a problem that cuts across all segments of society. Businesses in PNG are all too familiar with the plight of female workers turning up battered and bruised, or not turning up at all. Bosses want to help – have to, really – but hitherto haven’t known how.

Femili PNG operates in Port Moresby as part of the Bel Isi (or Peace) public-private partnership. Bel Isi is funded by the Australian government but also receives very substantial support from Port-Moresby-based businesses.

The impetus for the initiative came from a dedicated manager at the Bank of the South Pacific, PNG’s largest bank and one of the country’s largest employers. Faced with this problem of abused employees, she decided to act and persuaded her CEO not to sell off an unused male dormitory but convert it into a safe house or refuge.

BSP realised they couldn’t undertake this initiative alone, and slowly a coalition of businesses was built. Oil Search Foundation, the charitable arm of the large PNG oil and gas company Oil Search, took on a coordinating role. The property company Steamships donated an office. On the basis of the reputation we

had established in Lae, Femili was invited to be the operator for the initiative.

After considerable preparatory work Bel Isi commenced operations in September 2018. Whereas in Lae we operate a single case-management centre, in Port Moresby we have a refuge as well.

While we are extremely grateful for the help we receive from the private sector, and work with companies to ensure that they and their staff have somewhere to turn in times of crisis, our Case Management Centre is open to all clients, public and private, and we work hard to ensure that everyone who needs emergency accommodation has access to it.

We are also grateful for the strong leadership shown in Port Moresby by the city’s Governor (or mayor), who is outspoken about violence against women. Fittingly, the Steering Committee for Bel Isi is co-chaired by a representative of the Governor and the CEO of the BSP.

It is still early days at Port Moresby but initial signs are positive. We have a growing number of clients (almost as many now as in Lae) and are supported by more and more subscriber businesses.

Opening an office in Port Moresby has not only meant significant expansion of Femili PNG in PNG but also led to a need for more support from Australia. We have created a support group, Friends of Femili PNG, which is a vehicle for fundraising and the provision of technical support. Our major fundraiser is linked to the annual Canberra running festival. Experts who support Femili PNG on a voluntary basis range over a range of areas, including IT, communications, finance, and monitoring and evaluation. We encourage people to become regular donors through visiting our website at femilipng.org.

Expansion to Port Moresby was a vague hope when we set up in Lae, but the speed and scale at which it has happened and the innovative arrangements that have made it possible could not have been foreseen. There are many other urban centres in PNG that need the presence of a Femili PNG office. We have shown we have an effective model. Whether we can expand further will depend on whether the funding is available.