

Initiatives of Change Conference:

"AUSTRALIA AS A NEIGHBOUR"

International House, Melbourne, Australia, 12-16 January 2007

Session: "Living with the neighbour who is different: discovering the other", 13 January 2007

Jim Beggs:

My story is a very practical one of living with a neighbour who cared enough to help my wife and myself find a purpose for our lives, and of what can happen if there is an honest dialogue between people.

I was a "wharfie" - a waterside worker. We lived in an area that was not working class. Our new neighbours literally came from the other side of the fence. He was Liberal. I was Labor. He was on the executive of the Employers' Federation. I was a member of the most militant union in the country.

On the face of it we had nothing in common. I was building our house and would work until it was dark, trying to get the frame up. Not long after they moved in, I noticed they would put their side light on so I could work longer. At first I thought this was just a coincidence but it would happen every night.

Our first meeting was over the fence some weeks after they moved in. As we discussed the issues of the day, the waterfront came up. We had just finished a long strike with no one the winner. My neighbour asked me if I wanted to see things different on the waterfront. I said: "Yes, I did". He then said: "Do you know the place to start?" I thought of the bosses and the union officials. Even though there were good men on both sides of the industrial fence, in those days the ideological differences made it almost impossible to reach agreements without prolonged disputes. He suggested maybe the place to start was with myself.

I was one of the apathetic group on the wharf who was too busy doing my own thing, and blaming others for what went wrong in our industry. If I was honest, I couldn't have cared less. But my neighbour Tom's care in putting his light on each night interested me. I discovered he had given up a very good job on a matter of principle. He put people before profit in business.

He encouraged us to see where we could be different. Our neighbour put us in touch with a source of power that led us back to our faith. We accepted the challenge, and idea that God has a plan for everyone. We tried the idea of having a quiet time, listening to the inner voice. It didn't go too well at first because I would see where my wife could change, and she kept reminding me where I needed to change.

But through honesty a new trust grew between us. We began to see that if we really wanted to see the waterfront different, the place to start was with ourselves. I decided to get in the boat and take an oar, and to care for our extended family, the wharfies. It meant returning cargo I had stolen off the wharf, building bridges between former enemies, and getting involved in my union. A few years later I helped to change the national leadership of our union, bringing it back to the centre of the road. It led to permanent employment for every wharfie in Australia and reduced time lost from nearly 30% to a half a per cent. In 1971 I became President of the Melbourne Branch until I retired in 1992. As National President, I

was involved in one of the most outstanding industrial agreements ever signed in Australia that made our ports some of the most productive in the world. My experience has shown me that it may be difficult but much more rewarding to fight for not who is right, but what is right. My dramatic change started when my neighbour cared enough and left his side light on.

***Jim Beggs, AM, JP** was National President of the Waterside Workers' Federation of Australia from 1986 until 1992. He is a Life Member of the Australian Labor Party and Chairman of the Melbourne Port Welfare Association.*