

Collins Street Baptist Church

Advent 2 – 2023

Theme: 'Peace'

BUV General Superintendent Tony Cupit's 'My Peace I leave with you' written for the International Year of Peace (1986) –38 years ago. Height of the nuclear arms build up.

Highlighted the many dimensions of peace and peace making.

Biblical, theological, historical, personal, social, congregational and political. Peace with God, peace within, peace with others, peace on earth, Christ the 'Prince of Peace' and Christians as 'Bearers of Peace'. He wrote the book: To express the central influence of Christ as a peacemaker. He underlined the close links between **peace, righteousness (personal integrity) and justice.**

Cupit wrote that Christ's Beatitude, 'Blessed are the Peacemakers', had motivated countless Christians...to work for peace in the world. Peacemakers also included, however parents working for peace in the domestic sphere, missionaries serving in places of war and hopelessness, and slum workers bringing love and material support to the poor.

With this in mind, I tell you a little about **Cecilia Downing** (1858-1952), a member of this church for 46 years (1906-1952) – **the 2nd half of her life.** I am indebted to Basil Brown¹ and Judith Smart² for their research in what I am about to tell you about Cecilia.

She was born Cecilia Hopkins in London in 1858. Her family emigrated to Australia while she was a baby, settling in Williamstown. She lost many siblings to TB. Cecilia trained as a Primary School teacher at the Melbourne Teachers College. Following baptism, she joined the Williamstown Baptist church and married the church's minister, Rev John Downing in 1885. She was 27. They served in Kyneton where Cecilia did all the minister's wives' things (and learned valuable organizational skills). Ill health forced John to resign from the ministry and take up banking. Cecilia was always very involved in the local communities where John worked.

Upon returning to Melbourne in 1901, they settled here at Collins Street Baptist Church. They had seven (7) children, one died. **Just two years before she died, she was awarded an OBE.** These days OAM.

Cecilia obviously had leadership and organizational gifts which she put to very good use in her work with and for women (within and beyond the church). She founded the Victorian Baptist Women's Association, served as President of Women's Board of the Baptist Union of

¹ Basil Brown, *A Cloud of Witnesses* (The Victorian Baptist Historical Society, Baptist Union of Victoria, 1999), pp. 25-26

² Judith Smart, 'A Sacred Trust: Cecilia Downing, Baptist Faith and Feminist Citizenship', *Our Yesterdays* Vol 3 (1995), pp. 21-50. *Our Yesterdays* is an annual publication of the Victorian Baptist Historical Society, Baptist Union of Victoria.

Australia and active in the formation of the Women's Committee of the Baptist World Alliance.

She and other women made it clear to the men of the church that they did not see their primary function as a catering and fund-raising service. In the 1920s they were demanding a say in counsels of their denomination, the Baptists.

So her contribution was local, state, national and international among Baptist women and very much beyond!

She always maintained:

"The wider a woman's interests, the more good she can do in the community".

For any woman wishing to take up a public position, the first pre-requisite was a **'course in logic'**.

Equal opportunity for women, equal representation in local government were very strong convictions of Cecilia's.

She championed the cause of women and children who experienced anything but peace and justice in their homes, on the streets, in the workplace and in their neighbourhood, in the courts, the local councils. She had earlier worked for women's suffrage (the vote).

She served on the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the National Council of Women in Victoria; the Travellers' Aid Society; **Before WW! She was one of the first state-appointed probation officers to the Children's court.** Travellers Aid looked after young women and girls visiting the city', waiting at the train stations. They met migrants arriving in Australia after WW 2. Set up a school in Richmond for mothers. After WW 2 Cecilia worked with the Commonwealth Govt on procedures for reception of migrants. She had a deep concern for migrant welfare. During World War I and 2, an executive member of war loan and war savings committees.

She helped established the women's interchurch council (early ecumenism).

In her role as **President of the Housewives Association**, (pre and post ww 2), she was outspoken against influences that negatively impacted the home – women and children.

Women's organization in the early 1900s catered for the **thirst many women had for knowledge and study. Cecelia attended lectures and debates** on economics and industry, organisational principles, conscription and voluntary service, the benefits of the vote for women and the outlook for women after World War 2.

Cecilia read assiduously – not novels, but newspapers and Hansard. **Cataracts** removed at the age of 69 and relied on others to read to her and on radio broadcasts for news and parliamentary debates.

She herself used her role to **train women in organizational principles**; to train up other women to participate and lead; how to conduct meetings. **Hers was a participatory philosophy of leadership.**

By all accounts, **Cecilia was a force to be reckoned with**. Not a particularly irenic spirit if she thought that something was wrong. Reckoned by the press as a **'powerful woman**, one to be reckoned with in the maelstrom of politics'.

Challenged by the scarcity and rising cost of goods, the Housewives Association imposed boycotts on certain goods, tackled the Chamber of Commerce, arranged discount for cash purchases and revived a co-operative scheme for group buying and distribution of goods to the suburbs.

The Downings themselves were very comfortably off. They could afford to employ a servant to assist in the home and with the children when they were young. John was very supportive of his wife's busy public life. His working hours allowed him to share the parenting duties. He died in 1939. She was 81.

Widowhood did not slow her down. The provision of domestic help for over-worked mothers and housewives was a very strong cause. She gave **lectures on nutrition, wrote about growing vegetables, compost, mulching and managing chooks**. She wrote that 'the question of housing and food had a direct bearing on the morale of the community which **depended on their home conditions**'. **Concerned about the abuse of unprotected domestic labourers**, she worked to improve the status of domestic labour and their working conditions.

Her guiding principles emphasised service, responsibility and collective endeavour. Reflected in the mottoes of organization she led or served:

WCTU: 'For God, home and humanity'

Travellers Aid Society: 'By love, serve one another' (YMCA)

The Housewives' Association: 'For the good that we can do'.

The future of Civilisation could only be ensured by "Education for Christian citizenship and World Peace".

Cecilia and John were conservative in their theology and their politics. Many of us would disagree with them. Suspicious of state intervention and regulation, except in matters of law and order, morality and child protection. But this was no hindrance to action on her part.

As Judith Smart wrote:

'Cecilia Downing had worked harder than most others for **her vision of a just Christian society** and was unquestionably one of the most influential women of her time in Australia. By any standards her work and achievements, spanning over half a century, were remarkable'.

Cecilia was both a woman of her era but also ahead of her era. **As a very intelligent and energetic woman, she carved out a role and a sphere for herself**. If she had been born 50

years later, the story might have been very different. Business, academic life, professional, management...(CEO), judiciary..

Today, Cecilia would be a very strong advocate for those suffering homelessness, domestic abuse and violence. One working for peace, but not peace at any price! There is no peace without justice.

There are descendants of Cecilia and John in our churches today!

Our own **Barbara Martin is a cousin of Cecilia's great grandson, David Hughes**. He and his mother Jean Hughes - active in the Auburn Church.

Marita Munro, 10-12-2023