

# THE RECORDER



Newsletter of The Uniting Church  
Historical Society (NSW/ACT)



## DIETRICH BONHOEFFER - "I ought to have behaved differently"

*A reflection on Dietrich Bonhoeffer by Grahame Ellis.*

The quote above comes from a letter of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. And not from prison. Imprisonment happened a decade later. This letter was dated 23rd November 1933.

In April of that year Gerhard Leibholz senior, had died. He was an old man and father of Dietrich's brother-in-law, also known as Gerhard. Given that Gerhard Junior had married Dietrich's sister Sabine, it was reasonable that Dietrich Bonhoeffer be asked to conduct the funeral. But there was a sticking point. The Leibholz family was Jewish. Dietrich discussed this request with his Lutheran General Superintendent, who advised him against taking the funeral of a Jew "at that particular time", and specially so, when the deceased had not been baptised. This suggestion from the General Superintendent naturally influenced Dietrich, but the question had been in the forefront of Dietrich's mind. He said 'no' despite the wishes of some members of his family.

That was April 1933.

In November of that year he wrote a letter to Gerhardt, his Jewish brother-in-law:

*"I am tormented by the thought that I didn't do as you asked me, as a matter of course. To be frank, I can't think what made me behave as I did. How could I*



*have been so much afraid at the time? It must have seemed equally incomprehensible to all of you, and yet you said nothing. But it preys on my mind because it's the kind of thing one can never-make up for. So all I can do is to ask you to forgive my weakness then. I know now for certain that I ought to have behaved differently."*

On reading Dietrich's letter, just a little while before penning these words, I recalled my visit, some three decades ago, to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem. The architecture and design achieved their purpose. It did not just depict the horrors of Concentration Camps but it made the visitor feel those horrors. I remember the experience of cold. The bones in my arms were ice. The ribs in

my chest were ribs of ice. And I even wondered if my blood would stop flowing. In the Memorial there is an avenue of trees dedicated to the Righteous Gentiles who had helped Jewish people escape the Holocaust. Beneath each tree is a plaque with the name of a Gentile inscribed on it. Strangely, I imagined I saw the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer honoured there. Much later, I discovered that my imagination was stronger than reality. Bonhoeffer's name is **not** among the Righteous Gentiles who are honoured in the Avenue.

When I discovered the power of my imagination I wondered why he, in fact, did not have a place in that notable list. I now understand the requirements for being listed and thought that perhaps Dietrich Bonhoeffer's refusal to conduct the funeral of a Jew in 1933 might have been justification for the rejection of his name. I know that there are other possible reasons, but this one played/plays on my mind without any judgement of the Yad Vashem Trustees. We all now know that Dietrich should have behaved differently, and that consciousness we bring to the reading of the letter.

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## DIETRICH BONHOEFFER - "I ought to have behaved differently"

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In addition to that consciousness we also bring an awareness of the Nazi dominated environment in which Dietrich chose not to conduct the funeral. Hitler was the Reichs Führer. In him the German people lived, and moved, and had their being. In that sad moment in 1933, Dietrich discovered that his being had been controlled by the Führer. No doubt there were other moments of control that Dietrich experienced which played on his mind. One expression of that experience is

contained in another letter that he wrote, from prison, which included a poem. Its title is, "*Who am I ?*". In it he gives expression to his awareness of his own fickleness and longs for maturity, consistency, a faith inspired life. This was not granted and he confesses his bewilderment before the Great Consistency, God.

Ultimately, what Dietrich knew was that, although he did not know himself, God knew him. This was the foundation for his life. There was no other.

In 1933, Dietrich failed to conduct a funeral of a Jewish man with connections to his family. The moment of execution is linked to that failure, but revealed a maturity, a consistency, and a faith that still gives historians pause. "*This is the end*", he said. "*But for me the beginning of life*".

Guided by The Calendar of Commemorations, the members of the Uniting Church pause each 9th April to remember a man who "*ought to have behaved differently*", and did.

*Rev Grahame Ellis*

### **Who am I ?**

*by Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

Who am I? They often tell me  
I stepped from my cell's confinement  
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,  
like a Squire from his country-house.

Who am I? They often tell me  
I used to speak to my warders  
freely and friendly and clearly,  
as though it were mine to  
command.

Who am I? They also tell me  
I bore the days of misfortune  
equally, smilingly, proudly,  
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?  
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?  
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,  
struggling for breath, as though hands  
were compressing my throat,  
yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds,  
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,  
tossing in expectation of great events,  
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,  
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,  
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other?  
Am I one person to-day and to-morrow another?  
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,  
and before myself a contemptibly weebegone weakling?  
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,  
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?  
Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.  
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine!

***Bonhoeffer was executed on 9th April 1945 in Flossenbürg Concentration Camp***

## “WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?” and the Parish of Ruthwell

*Malcolm Prentis recounts some discoveries he made during a visit to his beloved Scotland.*

Who's heard of Ruthwell? It's a little village about 11 miles south-east of Dumfries in southern Scotland. Its modest tourist-attractions are the savings bank museum and the Ruthwell Cross. In 1810, the parish minister, **the Rev. Dr Henry Duncan**, opened the world's first commercial savings bank, paying interest on its investors' modest savings. In 1818, Dr. Duncan restored the Ruthwell Cross, one of the finest Anglo-Saxon crosses in the UK, which had been broken up during the Reformation but which has been erected within Ruthwell parish church.



*The Ruthwell Cross*

Ruthwell also has an interesting connection with Australia, which I also wanted to explore when in the area in October this year. I gained an inkling of this when I appeared fleetingly on the **Amanda Keller** episode of the SBS TV programme “Who Do You Think You Are?”, filmed in late 2013 and



*The Ruthwell Parish Church*

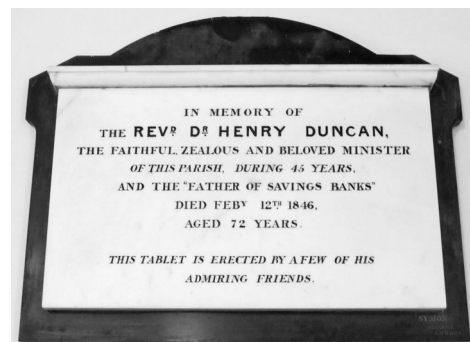
broadcast on 8 August 2016. Amanda's Scottish ancestor **Mary Clark** arrived in Sydney in July 1837 on the *John Barry*, which had experienced a typhus epidemic which took her husband William, a carpenter from Portsoy in Banff.

Mary was given a job on a property near Singleton belonging to the Scottish **Pagan family**, and formed a relationship and had a baby with an assigned convict **Samuel Dickinson** (later marrying him). The baby – also Samuel – was born on 14 January 1839 and baptised by the **Rev. Irving Hetherington**, Presbyterian minister of Patrick's Plains on 10 August 1840. Now, the recently married Hetherington had been chaplain on the *John Barry* and had lost his new wife **Jessie Carr** to the epidemic, just as Mary Clark had lost her husband. He was also from the same parish as the Pagan family, Mary Clark's employers – namely Ruthwell.

Indeed, I found several Pagans buried in the Ruthwell kirkyard. Hetherington was apparently related to both the Pagan family and another landed family in the area, the

**Cunninghams**, who also came from Dumfries-shire. As I said at the time to the producers of “Who Do You Think You Are?”, there's a great tragic and hopeful story here. Hetherington shared the loss of Mary Clark and was probably instrumental in arranging employment and housing for her and two of her orphaned children with kinsfolk from home. Hetherington had been ear-marked by the Presbytery of NSW for Goulburn, but his family connections in the upper Hunter led to a call from there and also benefited the widowed Mary Clark.

Hetherington ministered in Singleton for ten years and then Scots Church Melbourne until his death in 1875.



*Rev. Dr Henry Duncan's memorial*

(All photos are by the author.)

## AROUND AND ABOUT

*The following report was forwarded in April to the UCHS of NSW/ACT  
by Associate Professor William Emilsen, the President of the UC National History Society.*

### **What's happening with the Uniting Church National History Society ?**

Readers will recall that the Uniting Church National History Society (UCNHS) was launched at the inaugural Uniting Church National History Conference in Adelaide in June 2017. On that occasion, a draft constitution was discussed and referred for further development to the newly elected national board, and decisions were made about the directions and priorities of the new society.

#### **What's happened since then?**

- **Your national board has been meeting by telephone link-up.** The board members are as follows: William Emilsen, President (NSW), Wendy Beresford-Maning (NT), Patricia Curthoys (co-opted, NSW), Alison Longworth (WA), Glen O'Brien (Vic), Julia Pitman (QLD), Judith Raftery, Secretary, (SA), Robert Renton (Vic).
- **The constitution has been completed** and approved by UCA National Assembly.
- **The UCNHS has opened a bank account**, and was grateful to receive a healthy injection of funds from the profit generated by the Adelaide conference.
- **The Board has given considerable thought to membership issues.** We hope that members of state Uniting Church historical societies will choose also to become members of the UCNHS by ticking an additional box on their state membership forms. In states and territories where no local societies exist individuals may join the UCNHS directly. We have set a flat membership fee of \$20 p.a. and this may be paid by direct ETF, Pay Pal or cheque. Membership forms available on the Assembly website, your state Historical Society website or in hard copy from your state/territory representative and at public events.
- **Robert Renton has been editing the papers from the 2017 Adelaide conference** and these are almost ready for publication. Members of UCSAHS will receive a copy of this publication, *A Pilgrim People 40 years on*, as part of their membership package. It will also be available for purchase during the National Assembly in July.
- **The next major event will be our AGM and Public Lecture**, scheduled for Saturday 7 July 2018, on the eve of the National Assembly, which will be held in Melbourne, 8-14 July. Anyone who is interested in our church's history is strongly encouraged to be present at this event. We are delighted to announce that our **inaugural public lecture will be delivered by Prof. Stewart Gill, Master of Queen's College, Melbourne. Stewart will speak on "No Gods and Precious Few Heroes": Why We Need to Remember our History.** See Assembly website for further details.
- **UCNHS members and supporters will be staffing a table at Assembly** to promote the society, recruit members and sell copies of the 2017 conference papers.
- **Plans are taking shape for the next biennial conference** of the UCNHS, to be held in Melbourne, on the Queen's birthday weekend in June 2019. Plan to be there!

We hope you will make use of the Assembly website, as well as state UC Historical Society websites and newsletters to keep abreast of news and ensure that you are part of the ongoing program of UCNHS events.