

**RESPONSE TO MARY KLASSEN'S PAPER,
40 years of CPE in Australia – is there a Promised Land?
Mosaics and Mystery; pastoral care, clinical supervision and public health.**

Mary, in response to your paper, I wish to say first and foremost, thank you. Thank you for what you have shared, for how you have shared it, and the way you prepared for the sharing. I know this is a costly endeavour, and I know something of the cost that you have been prepared to pay, that has resulted in such a resonant and congruent presentation here today.

In fact, it is the overall approach that you have used, that gives rise to my major response to your presentation. Mary, you have gifted us today with a living example (dare I say, a living human document?) of theological reflection, which I believe strongly lies at the heart of CPE and the practice of Pastoral Care. You have integrated your own experience with that of others, particularly those with whom you minister, and allowed a process of openness and reflection to move you to a new place – not only literally in moving to Mercy Women's Hospital - but within your own soul, too, as you have listened to and worked with the stories you have heard here.

I believe this relates to the question about a Promised Land for CPE and Pastoral Care. I do hope and believe that there is indeed a Promised Land for us who are involved in this profession. But I sincerely hope and pray that none of us thinks we are there yet, or even likely to be there in the foreseeable future.

Why do we need a Promised Land? Well, let's look at the function of a Promised Land in our tradition. A Promised Land gives us the motivation to leave where we are comfortable, even in our enslavement, and move from a place of plenty to the hard experience of a journey in the wilderness, unsure of where to find food and water, not knowing where we will find a home. Both Abraham and Moses needed a promise to begin their journey. Without that, it would have only been an exercise of their own judgement, even hubris, to risk the futures of their people on such a questionable and perilous enterprise. In the light of a sense of God's promise of a new home, the journey becomes indeed an experience of transformation in faith and trust in the One who gives the promise, rather than only in their own wisdom and strength. So, yes, I do hope we all have a sense that we are on a journey of life and faith, that is in

response to the stirrings of God deep within our souls – the sense of a Promised Land. I do get the sense, Mary, that you are deeply aware of being called into this work, and that your journey is unfolding for you as you entrust yourself to it, enabling you to undertake challenges that would otherwise seem unimaginable.

But, “are we there yet?” as children often ask on a family trip. I sincerely hope not. Because, let’s look at what happens when people arrive in their Promised Land. They become settlers. They become comfortable. They have arrived. They start to lose what makes them different from other people. After having had a sense of being led by God in their journey in the wilderness, now they want to be like other people, and have a king to lead them. Those poor tortured souls, the prophets, try and try again to keep alive the covenant relationship of a pilgrim people among a settler society. I remember being struck by a comparison in a book by Mark Link, published way back in the early 1970’s (now I’m showing my age!) *He is the Still Point of the Turning World*, in which he contrasted Pioneer Theology with Settler Theology. I found it this week and re-visited it, and, despite the blokey and USA wild west imagery and language, it still evoked that sense of how different the whole experience of life seems when you look at it from such a different perspective as “pioneer” or “settler”.

Why this is important, I believe, is that it fundamentally affects the way we do theological reflection. O’Connell and de Beer, in their book, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, indicate that we can come to theological reflection from three different standpoints: Certitude, Self Assurance, or Exploration.

- Certitude would emerge from the sense of already being in the Promised Land – of being in possession of the truth of God here and now, leading to a reflection on ministry experience that will only be permitted to confirm, not challenge, the tenets of doctrine and faith that have formed us. The Tradition is used to interpret the experience, so that there are answers to all life’s questions to be found there, and given to those who seek them.
- Self Assurance emerges from the sense of having accumulated the wisdom and resources required for making meaning through the experience of life, and the development of skills and attributes that gives us the tools to handle and respond to the issues that present during our pastoral encounters. This

standpoint probably doesn't see any great value in a Promised Land at all. Strangely, this standpoint also generates a sense of having the answers that others are seeking – but from one's own experience, rather than from the Tradition of faith.

- The stance of Exploration, which O'Connell and de Beer advocate, emerges from the capacity to allow an open dialogical reflection process to occur in the experience of ministry. New issues and experiences emerging from the stories of others are permitted to raise new questions for us, and to call us into new understandings and responses. The experience of attending to another's search for their own meaning in the midst of their pain is allowed to be fully confronting to our own thirst for meaning, rather than cut short by offering some pre-packed formula for meaning. At times our Tradition will be able to throw some light on this process; at other times it seems to block us, and we must challenge the understanding we have had of it till now. In all of this, we allow ourselves to become fellow travellers, fellow seekers of meaning with those with whom we minister.

Paul Tillich, in an article on *The Theology of Pastoral Care*, wrote that, unless it includes an openness to mutuality between carer and the recipient of care, pastoral care makes the recipient an object, and demeans their value and experience. To the extent that we are aware of not being presently in the Promised Land, but on a journey, we can be open to sharing the human experience of seeking meaning amid the experiences of feeling lost, confused and uncertain, along with those with whom we minister. This quality of spiritual uncertainty, of a tentative approach reminiscent of taking off one's shoes on holy ground, I believe, colours our practice of pastoral care during an encounter, not just afterwards, which is when we normally can give the time to theological reflection. Our willingness to let ourselves be drawn later into dialogue with the impact of a person's story and to allow this to question, challenge and deepen our hard-won touchpoints of spiritual security, reaches back into the conversation itself, and creates a real willingness to listen openly and be moved by the stories we hear.

For me, theological reflection is indeed the heart and soul of both CPE and the practice of Pastoral Care. How many of us, when we first began in this field, were so

anxious about knowing what to say, or what to do, to help patients – a terrifying prospect as we approached those early bedsides. Perhaps our image of CPE early on was the opportunity to sit at the feet of a guru (the Supervisor) and learn what to do and not to do, and to pick up from the other participants some welcome additions to our toolbox of appropriate responses to this or that situation. What a fundamental breakthrough it was to discover, usually from skilful supervision, that the main thing is to discover one's own capacity for being there with the other, offering the simplest imaginable gift of caring presence. But, as the ad would say, there's more! Having discovered this basic truth, we then have the wherewithal to take the next step, which is theological reflection. An encounter in which we are prepared to offer human-to-human existential and empathic presence to a person experiencing a tough period of life's journey has so much to offer us, if we are prepared to let it move us deeply, in our very soul. And, I believe, we will only be willing to let it move us if we are aware of being on a spiritual journey of making and re-making meaning, along with all of humanity, because we are not yet in the Promised Land. It is this openness that creates the capacity for living with mystery, that Mary has referred to today.

Thank you again, Mary, for being such a seeker of meaning and mystery here among us today. There are many other areas of response we could explore, but I will end here so that time can be given to the responses of others.