

CWL Conference, Rotorua, July 2021 - Summary

(Warning – if one sits at a front table, right under the eye of the National President and taking notes, one can get the job of giving the Conference Summary)

After some travel hiccups, we assembled in the foyer of the Millennium Hotel, Rotorua We picked up our lanyards and conference packs, bought our raffle tickets, greeted old friends, and waited for the powhiri to begin. It was explained that when we entered, we'd be taking with us all our absent friends and families because we took in our life's experience. We had a very dignified ceremony and the shared touch of the hongi made the welcome physical and warm.

Sister Claire's first liturgy enhanced our understanding of the Holy Spirit whose prayer is also the League Prayer and wove it into the exclamation "Kia Kaha" – our present theme.

Annah Stretton was our first keynote speaker. She told us the history of "raw", the ups and downs, the battles, the successes and missteps. She showed us that effecting social change works when it is personal and governed by those who choose to change, be at their pace and how it happens be their choice. They must direct while she has role of enabler, advocate and financier. From her we learned a new catch phrase – **"No is a Yes waiting to be turned around."**

After lunch it was time for everyone to get involved in Workshops There were four and I can only talk about the one where I was. It was "Knitting". *(At first sight a stereotype CWL might want to avoid.)* People had been asked to bring peggy squares to the Conference. Now they had to be sewn together. Our aim was to have completed blankets to give to Family Focus who would speak to us later in the Conference. *(It was definitely not going to be impolite to work at this project as the Conference agenda continued.)*

Back to the serious business session, to hear reports from our representative to PPSEAWA and NCW, our Special Officers and the Diocesan Presidents – some of which stretched over into the next morning's session. Our Mission Secretary Jenny accounted for the money CWL had given to charity. She reminded us not to forget Gum Boot Friday that supports Mike King's mental health charity. Jenny introduced her successor and was given flowers and loud applause for her work over the last five years. A suggestion came from the floor that a collection be taken up to help communities in Fiji. Our International Officer spoke about WUCWO, its 110-year anniversary fast approaching and that efforts this year, are towards resolution no.3 (the elimination of violence against women). The reports had to be paused so we could go to the Conference Mass.

Bishop Steve Lowe lead us in the Feast Day Mass for Saint Mary Magdalen who he praised as "the apostle to the apostles" because she was the first person that Jesus appeared to after his resurrection, charging her to take the "good news" to Peter and the rest. He was aided by many priests from the diocese and a lively music group singing modern hymns. The parish had made a lavish supper for us, making a happy end to a full day *(a full end to a happy day.)*

Next morning, we remembered our fellow members who had died in the last three years (i.e., since the last national conference). The list was long and many of us found names to mourn. Candles were lit and roses laid in their memory.

Back to the reports – from which came several memorable quotes - **"CWL is the back-bone of the Church; "It's amazing how much those with a walking stick or a walking frame can do."**

Some were straightforward and factual but two diocese both gave us poems. One had made two shorth videos showing CWL activities, both the achievements and the fun. In my opinion the videos could be used to promote CWL in any part of the country *(though giving fund raising ideas to Christchurch Diocese is no part of my remit.)* A sobering fact emerged – our membership in now below 1000. Dunedin Diocese has only three branches left and Palmerston North is merging with Wellington. We have passed

from slimming to shrinking, wasting away looms over us. Sister Claire wrapped up the session by a Reflection in which she expressed admiration at how much money CWL can generate and move around. Our efforts contributed to the wellbeing of society as we worked for social and economic justice. It was an affirming reflection and took us happily to our morning tea.

Then came our National President's report. She too had a mantra to grab our attention. ***“Old ways won't open new doors.”*** There followed a frank and hard assessment at where CWL stands today, its declining membership and its ethos. How are we perceived? Is the problem that we are seen as old and dull, or do we represent “white privilege” to those of other ethnicities or socio-economic groups? Are we a group that we'd be eager to join if we weren't already involved? Members were asked to think honestly about our League and realise that to attract others we had to be prepared to try new ideas, adopt a new style and be innovative. The words “white privilege” was an affront to some. It was used as a shock to make us think, but the discussion that followed revealed hurt feelings. One of our Maori members recommended that we treat each other, in the League and outside, with kindness and tolerance. Even so, lunch time discussions were lively.

In the afternoon we went on a bus trip to explore the Christian history of Rotorua at St Faith's (C of E) and the nearby St Michaels (RC). We admired the peaceful atmosphere of both churches and absorbed a sense of history, as well as admiring the beautiful and traditional artwork. Many photos were taken, including of the peaceful views over the lake. Back on the bus we went to the Catholic co-ed secondary school. We had already met some of the pupils at the powhiri. Now they treated us to a huge afternoon tea while the deputy headmaster told us about the school, its history, records and plant. We staggered back to the bus to recruit our energy for the Conference Dinner.

It was laid out beside the swimming pool. There were some chilly spots but the food was plentiful and tasty, while the entertainment was lively and included songs we'd grown up with. We dined, we sang, joined a conga line, twisted and danced in the company of old friends and the new ones we were making. (*Returning to our room Diane and I became aware of a new ‘First’ for CWLANZ. The Facebook moderators had removed one of her posts for contravening their standards. She hadn't even posted the video of our dancing yet.*)

Sister Claire started our session next day with a gentle reflection based on Mary our mother and moving into the spreading of peace and comfort. The final prayer included a sentence that could apply at all times. (*Bless our deliberations with discerning hearts and well-informed minds.*) We then resumed the AGM, some of us sewing and crocheting hard. We breezed through the Remits and Recommendation, and accepted the Annual Financial report by acclamation (*so pleased that the traditional sport of grilling the treasurer is a thing of the past*). The National Board was introduced and dedicated just in time for our next outside speaker's slot.

Zandra Vaccarino, President of the Down Syndrome Association had come to talk about its work. She started by showing us her son's wedding photos and told us that having a son with Down Syndrome was not a tragedy but a moving into a different life-style. Zandra described the underlying realities and the blessings of living with children with such disadvantages, as well as the problems they and the Association face. We learned that it is parent driven and oriented, gets no government funding, and its greatest benefit is to reassure parents that they are not alone. A major way is by running a camp for those with the syndrome and their carers. It is to this camp that the funds from our CWL ‘At Home’ Appeal this year will go. We learned that the Association is open to those with problems caused rare chromosome combinations. I was very interested in this because we have such a granddaughter. Such children have a different outlook and restricted opportunities. (*Our Vanessa is at the local Catholic primary school. One day her class teacher had an accident and cut her arm. There was blood. The class stood back aghast. This doesn't happen to a teacher. Vanessa went over and gave her a big hug, saying “Never mind Mrs Gob. It'll be alright. Be brave”.*) We were impressed and motivated

We had more speakers after morning tea. Tai and Chantal from a Rotorua group called Family Focus came to describe their work. Their work is to mitigate the effects of family violence. Tai gave us examples of their pragmatic advice – “always have your house keys and ATM card in your pocket”; “avoid getting into a fight in rooms like the kitchen, bathroom or garage where household tools can become weapons”; “remember your children may be in bed but they can hear raised voices.” They repeated the same messages as our other two guest speakers that the impulse for change must come from those with the problem (the ones we see as victims), changes will be individual and cannot be prescribed by outsiders. Chantal works in counselling people who are victims, of abuse both physical and sexual. Many of their clients come with a back story of intergenerational economic disadvantage, which is continuing with them. Half a dozen blankets were completed and presented, with the promise of a few more still to be finished. It was a colourful display. The guests were surprised and delighted, (*and I think, the rest of the Conference impressed by our collective industry*).

There was still ‘General Business’ to be gone through. Here the hurt of ‘white privilege’ came back from those who had taken it personally, not as a call to genuine reassessment of the League’s position and perception from outside. Diane, who had her laptop to hand in order to post items to the CWL Facebook page, found a clear and helpful definition online. I can add nothing to it (*and I’m not saying that just because she is my lift home.*) The points and feelings were noted. We remain a caring, outward looking organisation but we need to take stock and “embrace change” as a previous motto proclaimed, while keeping in mind “Kia Kaha” take courage.

The Conference moved to its conclusion with thanks and farewells. We thank our President and her teams for an absorbing programme, run with skill and patience. We thank our guest speakers for opening windows onto lives and needs outside our experience. We thank Sister Claire for the thoughtful and affirming liturgies. We thank Sylvia for the IT that worked more or less hitch free, and for her calm and competence when problems occurred. We thank the tangata whenua for their welcome, and will keep in mind the words “gentleness” and “kindness” as the key to race relations and the way we treat others...

Anne Lumb
2021 July National Conference, Rotorua.