



## **What We Say About Ourselves**

### **My first contact with the Waiters Union**

*Stephanie Becker*

My first contact with the Waiters Union had been through church meetings that are held every Sunday night at 6:30 pm in St Andrews Anglican Church South Brisbane. I visited those meetings on several occasions, without really knowing about the Waiters Union. To learn more about the Waiters I read Dave Andrews books *Christi-Anarchy* and *Building a Better World*. I also conducted research on the internet to find articles on the subject and visited gatherings. To get a more personal insight into the life of the Waiters Union, I interviewed Dave Andrews, visited a community meal on Friday night and went to a 6:30 am Monday morning meeting. I also talked to some people associated with the Waiters Union who regularly visit the Sunday night service.

To write a paper in the true modernist sense about the Waiters Union seems a contradiction in itself, since the people who see themselves connected to the Waiters Union avoid naming, classifying or structuring their idea of life, relationships and friendships together. Even the term 'community' does not fit the Waiters Union, as it is a group of people who strive to live towards community- it is a dynamic process rather than a static construct. The persons in the Waiters Union are deliberately avoiding structures, programs or set agendas, they are instead a bunch of people who aim to be simply present and available for one another.

The Waiters Union began when Dave and Ange Andrews came back from India some 15 or so years ago. They chose the West End, Highgate Hill, Hill End and South Brisbane area as a place to promote relationships and live within a network of people who feel a calling to "stop, look, listen and above all wait" on God and the need of the neighbour (*Christi-Anarchy*, p. 195). West End seemed the ideal place to do this as it is located in the bend of the Brisbane River and even though it is very close to the inner city, it has a more village-like feel to it, and it has a different pace to the rest of Brisbane. West End is also one of the most densely populated suburbs, which is characterised by a higher percentage of low-income households (even though that is dramatically changing) as well as a high migrant population. The Waiters Union constitutes of roughly 20 households out of the 6000 in West End (*Christi-Anarchy*, p. 197). Dave Andrews says that they see themselves not *apart* from the locality, but as a *part* of the locality and as a network of residents who *work towards community* that is *integral* to the locality.

The Waiters Union is inclusive to everybody, regardless of race, gender, sexuality or religion, despite the Christ focus of the Waiters. The Waiters aim to reflect the love of Christ, to develop a relationship to Christ and relationships to people through Christ. Dave makes a clear distinction between a Christian and someone who is aiming to be Christlike. Dave is wary of all institutions and the Waiters avoid institutionalisation. Institutions can deliver a service, but could never care, institutions frequently tend to

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dehumanise individuals through the way they provide help and people easily are reduced to labels.

The Waiters Union can appear to be rather fuzzy and undefined, hard to grasp, for our western structuralist mindset. However, this absence of structure makes it inclusive of all people, faiths and life circumstances. There are no clear determining indicators of who is in or out, because there is no defined membership. Unlike in many other traditional Christian communities, the Waiters adopt a Christ centred approach where people are seen as constantly moving towards Christ, instead of being boxed into a mould which makes them either insiders or outsiders, Christians or non-Christians, saved or not saved. Because Christ is understood to be above religion, above theology and free of western values, the Waiters have conversations with people from other faiths, in a non-threatening way to the faith of the other. Dave points out that 'conversion' happens all the time in both listeners, not just the non-Christian and he highlights the importance of *conversation*, which is closely related to the word *conversion*. Biblically conversion never happens without relationship and relationships are built on knowing each other, which happens through conversation with each other. Through conversation, Christ as a figure can be found in *any* human story regardless of religion. The Christ Story runs deeply through a human's heart. Communication and openness are at the heart of the Waiters Union, which invites everybody to participate or contribute with the gifts they have.

The Waiters are an intentional community of people who have a common idea about life, social justice and the role of Christ in their lives and neighbourhood. In some sense, the Waiters Union is a transformative community, despite its deliberately low profile. Dave Andrews says, "Change may start with us, but if it stops with us it will stop altogether; we need to make changes, but others need to make changes too."

Like Jesus the Waiters see themselves as servants to their neighbourhood offering help, hospitality and a desire to listen to peoples stories, understand their problems and work towards solutions. They do not seek to establish power hierarchies and structures but engage in justice, social action and peaceful resistance. The focus is on building relationships as well as on issues in the immediate neighbourhood regarding Indigenous groups, refugees, people with drug addictions, people in boarding houses, the mentally ill, or otherwise marginalised neighbours.

Like Jesus who criticised institutionalised religion and oppressive power structures, the Waiters deliberately choose, as mentioned above, to avoid the pitfalls of institutionalisation. One of the precautions to avoid power struggles and hierarchy is the chosen flat structure. Every person who is affected by a certain matter makes decisions within the Waiters Union. The Waiters are involved with various cooperatives and decisions regarding those cooperatives are made by the people who are affected by the consequences of the decisions. Hence, everybody can become part and has a voice in the Waiters Union simply by participating to whatever degree they like.

The Waiters are held together by relationships, not by authoritarian structures. There is no bureaucracy amongst the Waiters; they act without needing approval from a leadership figure. The lack of structure promotes *mutual accountability* rather than structural or hierarchical accountability (Dave Andrews). Even though Dave is a prominent figure in the Waiters Union he sees his role as a *facilitator* not an initiator, he aims to *enable people* instead of taking charge of a leadership role. He aims to relate to all people as equals. This seems to be a struggle at times because people

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are used to the prevalent paradigm of leadership and subordinates and frequently refer back to him for answers or responsibility.

The location plays an important role in the Waiters Union. It effectively works out of peoples homes. The location helps the Waiters to focus specifically on the need in that particular area. The location becomes something like a “bonded set”. While the Waiters seem to have no clear boundaries, there is a bonded centre in which location leads to relationships. For many people in the area who lack the mobility to leave their neighbourhood this is important. This focus on the neighbourhood is coherent with Jesus’ desire that we ought to love our neighbour and if we lack interaction with our neighbour, we miss what Jesus has asked us to do. This is a strongly counter-cultural push in an increasingly fragmented society in which the poorest and most marginalised suffer the most. To live in a neighbourly way of helping, listening and being present with the other seems to be almost a radically new thought. To be with the poorest in society does not equal a professional social workers’ attitude. This would perpetuate existing power relations. In contrast, the Waiters aim with an awareness of their own brokenness and weakness to live through Christ, love, prayer and persistence equal relationships that can transform lives. All relationships can be a mutually enriching process if openness exists.

The ministry of the Waiters is diverse and they have various projects or activities, which create a deepening of relationships and hence of the community. They are committed to meeting each other’s needs. In addition, the way in which some of the members contribute their gifts, money or other possessions, work in unpaid jobs as well as pooling resources creates to my understanding a resemblance of Acts 2 and 4. It is an ideology, which Dave calls the “Visionary agenda of Jesus of Nazareth” to choose poverty over wealth, hardship over comfort, commitment to availability to everyone at the cost of one’s own privacy, to serve everyone. But Jesus also retreated on a mountain to have refuge from people and to spend time only with God. Jesus also fled the crowd to be alone with his disciples. I believe ‘unlimited’ availability to the other is not biblical and not healthy and would lead to burn out, if it is not balanced with time alone and time with God.

The ministry is evident in different groups and everyone could start a new group. There are groups doing a range of activities, a men’s and a women’s group, world music gatherings, support groups for refugees, community meals, a church service, Monday morning meetings to sing, meditate, reflect and discuss issues, food cooperatives and many more initiatives. Dave mentions a shelf company, which helps to fund programs to enable individuals to start projects. It is a resource association everybody can apply to for funding. It acts in a servant nature - from below - having Jesus as an example.

An important gathering for the Waiters is the 6:30 pm service on Sunday nights. I went to this service, which is at times referred to as ‘chaos’ church in an endearing sense. The services are open to everyone and many people from the area who live in boarding houses and hostels are mentally or intellectually challenged or otherwise marginalised find a place here to be together, chat, pray, laugh, cry, share joys and worries, find an ear and a warm cup of coffee with a biscuit and friends. The service is as non-structured as possible and as non-hierarchical as possible, everybody can give a talk if they want to. That means no set minister delivers the message. Dave deliberately holds a background position to let others speak and avoids an up-front role. The seating is important, because unlike most churches where the congregation faces each other’s back and towards an ‘elevated’ minister or a transcendent God, the Waiters have arranged circles. I feel this is more like Jesus would have sat with

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his disciples facing each other. A circle is inviting and inclusive. When I participate in a service, I become aware of how authentic it is. No one carries a social mask, the service and the people are stripped of pretentiousness and social codes of conduct. When we sit in the circle, we are equal, all broken in some way. I sense that Jesus is right amongst us with all our imperfections, indeed it feels as if this would be the people Jesus would be sitting with the people who are normally excluded from clean and proper church meetings, the ones with very little power, the ones who have time and are never too busy. It is certainly counter-cultural and that is exactly what Jesus was. He did not accommodate with the norm, he was critical of the leadership and the masses. Another important aspect is that it is a forum for what is happening. People who are involved in various areas announce indigenous and social justice events. That means the gathering does not stop at the church doors. It also highlights that faith *is connected* to social action, justice and concern for the other and not simply a religious exercise. I also appreciate the simplicity of the service itself. No ecstatic music team, no overly joyous leadership trying to convince the audience that all suffering is overcome. This service creates room for a God who is evident and experienced in suffering. He is not just the King of Glory in shining armour promising earthly riches but he is also a God who can be found through suffering and in suffering.

A core group of the Waiters meets on Monday mornings at 6:30 am. When I visited we were seven people, singing and reading out of a book before reflecting on it. What struck me was the honesty with which we could discuss and reflect on questions without threatening someone's theology. I assume because Jesus stands above religion and theology it is possible to ask questions. Again we sat in a circle and sang. A beautiful way to start a week.

Personally, I have been very touched by the vision of the Waiters. I have been in contact with people who do associate or have been with the Waiters and I feel deep within myself that the approach of a Christ centred, non-structural, non-institutionalised, non-religious, non-hierarchical way of living together and helping each other out, and having a heart and the will to confront the injustice that occurs globally and locally is deeply at the centre of Jesus' message. I never understood how Western, white, middle class Christians seemed at times to have a primary claim on the interpretation of the Gospel proclaiming almost an exclusive message of Jesus as the Glorious King of victory who seemed to be careless towards a culture and a society that tramples on the weak, that never takes time to listen to the oppressed and that supports a system which is established on power and greed. To me it seems the Waiters open windows for other voices to be heard, they try to live the message of Jesus not in a Christian, but in a Christ centred way, focusing on Christ's life and actions and discovering that his message is very much in contrast with the cultural paradigms, and it offers an inclusive message for the ones that otherwise would have little value in society.

I believe a danger is that the Waiters can become self-righteous. Because the message is in stark contrast to what mainstream society is living, there is a danger of becoming judgmental towards the ones who live a different way of Christianity. I remember that some years ago, I met someone whom I now know is part of the Waiters. I asked her if she visited a church and her reply indicated that she did, but in a different way from other Christians. Her answer and demeanour demonstrated to me disrespect for others. I believe there is a danger to fall into a similar trap as some suburban middle class congregations do, namely to be better than the other. Another problem I see is that of a flat leadership structure. I recognise how hard Dave seems to work to simply facilitate and enable others. However, all of us have grown up in a

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society that is based on hierarchy and it is not easy to totally abandon that. This thought has been confirmed in a conversation with a woman who used to be with the Waiters but moved away. She said that if there were problems, people would refer back to Dave, or would blame him. That does not mean that I disagree with a facilitator function, or the idea of a flat structure, I simply believe that it is difficult to maintain that there is no traditional leadership role amongst the Waiters. It is also a given that some people have greater leadership qualities than others. It is a matter of how leadership is conducted. Jesus had a leadership role, yet he did not exert power over people in an oppressive sense, he enabled people, he encouraged people and created awareness of their freedom. In that sense, it might be a question of redefining leadership, instead of rejecting it.

The local aspect of the Waiters is important. By keeping it local and small with a low profile, it can serve the needs of the neighbour very specifically. Since I have been going along to some of the Waiters meetings I have become aware of connections between people who I have not connected before. I find that very inspiring and see Jesus' command to love our neighbour (after loving God) very much reflected in that. The isolation and fragmentation of life leads into a cul de sac and I am excited to live in a neighbourhood in which I can get involved. I believe that it is necessary for our existence to stop and listen to the small voices on this earth, the voices that are not loud and domineering. I live in West End and I am excited after doing this research to get involved. I have already made connections with various people on my street who are associated with the Waiters and I am excited to be living in connection with people who share a similar vision as I do, without having to let go of my individuality, as it seems to be the case in some communities or churches. I appreciate the diversity within the Waiters Union and the absence of a real structure. It seems to give people the chance to breathe, to be connected, but not indoctrinated by community. Jesus offered us an incredible amount of freedom of expression, and I believe that communities like the Waiters, who constantly strive towards community and which is held together by relationships, mutual accountability and compassion instead of disconnectedness and hierarchy is reflecting the life of Christ with his disciples.

### **Belonging to the Waiters Union**

*Helen Beazley*

My husband and I have thought of ourselves as belonging to the Waiters Union since moving to West End in 2000. We regularly participate in the Monday morning meetings, the weekly community church service, the fortnightly community meal, monthly picnics and six weekly gatherings.

This list of 'activities' gives the impression of a program-centric organisation and, of course, Waiters is anything but.

The 'routine' of our involvement with Waiters reflects our preference for structured interactions. So one of our greatest learnings has been from Waiters families who are less activities-focussed but who constantly open up their lives and homes to people in difficult circumstances and often with difficult behaviours. As a consequence we have been challenged to relate more freely and flexibly to friends in our community who face various challenges.

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In fact learning from other's lived convictions, rather than conforming to a prescribed set of rules, seems to be the way of Waiters. While our household is not vegetarian, the convictions of vegetarians in the group have caused us to rethink our eating habits and to be far more concerned with the wellbeing of farm animals. While our household does not home school, the practice of this option by some makes us think more deeply about the values we want to impart to our children and the negative cultural influences we want to shield them from. While our household owns a car, the simple lifestyles pursued by others in the group has made us determined to minimise our household's private transport requirements. In other words, my partner and I judge ourselves against the Christ-like practices of others at Waiters, trying to adjust our own values and practices in light of their witness, rather than having 'authority figures' or a set of rules sit in judgement over us.

It would be misleading not to allude to some of the frustrations we have experienced. Downplaying structure has sometimes led to things falling into a hole. Sometimes we have felt disappointment at the varying priority given to regular fellowship times. But most of the time we are encouraged by the integrity of people associated with the Waiters network in taking on unpopular causes, befriending unpopular people, and embracing unpopular values like humility, simplicity, and sacrifice.

Who knows what the future holds for Waiters. The gentrification of the area has made it difficult for people wanting to live simply and identify with the poor to make their homes permanently in this locality. The irony was not lost on us when the purchase of our house in West End (for more than we hoped to pay) settled in the same week that a hostel whose residents had long standing relationships with Waiters folk, closed its doors. Question marks around Waiters ability to sustain itself and its now iconic programs such as community meal, used to bother me. But now I feel more laid back, a bit more in tune with the original intent of Waiters, which I think is about waiting on those who the mainstream generally passes by, listening, praying, responding, and seeing what happens next.

### **Being in the Waiters Union for eighteen years**

*Steve Collins-Haynes*

For me the Waiters Union has been a ready-made community network to connect with since 1987. I got to know a couple of members of the network through a protest about rising rents around the time of the 1988 World Expo. Since then I've become friends with quite a few people in the Waiters Union and participated in many activities of the network.

Another big thing the Waiters Union has done for me has been to bring my wife, Judy, and I together. We met at a "community meal" one Friday night many years ago. We got to know each other as friends when we lived in the Bristol Street household. This household was committed to personal growth and justice in our neighbourhood and our world. Living in the Bristol Street household provided a great context to work on my own life and to establish a lasting relationship. Judy and I decided to get married after being friends for many months.

In my time of involvement with the Waiters Union I've had at least three major break-downs (some might say these were a result of my involvement). Seriously, though,

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these breakdowns have been long painful experiences for me and my family. People from the Waiters Union have helped in many ways. Some have visited me regularly in and out of hospital. Some have supported my wife Judy through these times. A couple of people started a local Grow group which helped significantly with my mental health. Another past member counselled Judy and I through one of my breakdowns.

Currently I'm part of a "men's group" which meets once a fortnight at my place. The group provides a safe space to express our trials and successes, to learn from one another and to offer and receive support. I also see a counsellor from outside the network to help me gain more control over my life.

It was through the support of a couple of people in the Waiters Union that I've been able to create and sustain my self employment. I run a small carpentry business from home. Many of my customers are from the network.

The Waiters Union has been a great network to be involved in over the eighteen years I have lived in West End. I feel I've experienced a level of support that many people wish for. I feel privileged to be a part of it. I think it is quite unique. It has made my life in West End incredibly rich.