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John Osborne

Through his work as an educator, a community leader, city councillor, and lay minister, John held a firm belief that the relationships we build are vital in our work, our personal life and in our ministry to one another; no one person is an island and no one is greater than any other. He lived these values and strove to be available to all people he came in contact with. John is remembered for having a sharp memory in particular, for knowing the names of everyone he ever met. *People are important—you should know their names.* He was, however, described as *‘a reluctant leader’*, because it was something he never aspired to but was asked to do.

In his lifetime John took on several leadership roles and his humble approach meant he was held in high regard. In turn he strove to re-invent what leadership actually meant. *The paradigm of authority should be turned on its head so that a leader is the least important person, put there to facilitate dialogue, across key parties to ensure the needs of a community are met.* His efforts to understand more fully what community-led development could actually look like, were unabated.

Known as Jack by his family, he grew up on a farm in the Avoca valley near Dargaville, the fourth child of eight siblings. Jack developed a strong sense of independence, discipline and determination to *‘get the job done’*, whatever it was that lay in front of him. He also developed a strong sense of fair play and support for the underdog.

John married Iris Armitage in 1936 and they began their married life as teachers in Apiti, north of Feilding. John served in the Second World War, for which he was awarded an MBE

(Member of the British Empire). After the war his teaching career continued at Ruawai and Te Kopuru, and at Taupo District High School where he was headmaster. In 1952, the family moved to Takapuna on the North Shore of Auckland so that John could become the foundation principal of Hauraki Primary School. John was admitted as a Fellow of the New Zealand Educational Institute in 1971. He was also an inspector of schools and finally, the foundation principal of North Shore Teachers College in Akoranga Drive until his retirement in 1977. In 1980, when the Teachers’ College was suddenly closed down, much of the outcry from the public was in remembrance of the family atmosphere John had created amongst staff and students. John said faith was valuable *‘in a place like the college’*, and it had an effect on other people around him. His friend, Mervyn Dine recalls: *He once got into trouble with one student’s mother for telling a girl to go home and read Ecclesiastes chapter two. When the mother complained, John told her to read it, too!* He believed that living only for



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John, 1966

pleasure is meaningless, as is toil or labour purely for gain—*a mere chasing after the wind.*¹

John and Iris were members of the Takapuna Methodist Church; John became a lay preacher, as well as Bible class and men's fellowship leader. He was instrumental in getting the congregation to think about how they came together as community, to socialise together, to support one another, to live out the gospel in their own lives. In 1958, he surprised many in the church by taking the Bible class off to camp in two tents in the Hunua Ranges with no Bible study and no formal programme. There was no aim apart from having an enjoyable weekend together. In the 1970s John organised cultural groups, social dances, more camps, and programmes for youth. He divided the pastoral roll of the Takapuna church into groups of about twelve people and found a leader for each group. It was the leader's responsibility to make contact with members of their group every three months and occasionally invite the group to meet as a whole. The leaders met in John and Iris's home on a monthly basis for Bible study.

The Takapuna congregation was by then instigating new programmes for its members, and community campaigns which promoted a shift in previously held social values. Not all of its campaigns were welcomed by communities on the North Shore; for example, the early prohibition campaigns in the 1950s when the congregation protested the proposed establishment of a tavern in Browns Bay, which was never built.

Since the 1960s the church had also been helping refugee families from Yugoslavia, Greece, Hong Kong, Uganda and Cambodia. In 1974 the congregation set up the social services and public questions committee, which was instrumental in supporting new local services and community groups. One such service was Willow Lodge in Glenfield Road, which provided emergency accommodation. Members of the congregation also volunteered in a newly established Takapuna Citizens Advice Bureau in 1979. The church provided its own services as well; social outings for

older people, support groups for people with sight or hearing impairment, and English language classes.

The church also joined forces with other churches and the public on political issues such as the abolition of capital punishment in the 1950s, the exclusion of Māori in the 1957 All Blacks tour to South Africa, the ANZUS Treaty (1976), the 1981 Springbok tour of New Zealand, and in 1982 the church was declared a nuclear weapon-free zone. In 1983 Labour Party leader David Lange addressed morning worship on 'Should a Christian ever disobey the law?' and National Party candidate Don Brash did the same on 'The Economy—How Christian?' Mervyn Dine was minister from 1981 to 1990, and recalls that John always took time to greet people in the street. John himself did not participate in any form of public protest, but held his own political views. *I think he liked George Gair, but he would never have voted for him,* says Mervyn.²

The Takapuna Circuit of the Methodist Church was founded in 1883. Two churches were built; the first near Northcote Road, and the second in Huron Street, Takapuna, which was rebuilt on the corner of Tennyson Avenue and Lake Road in 1923. In the late 1950s, a cottage next door was gifted by Eric Winstone. By the 1980s the cottage was not being used and some congregation members, including John, suggested that it could be of benefit to the wider community. John supported the initiative as long as any profits made from rent were used to support grassroots community work. The cottage became known as the Richardson Centre. The upstairs was rented to a dentist and the income supported community groups which used the downstairs rooms. The centre still stands today.

From 1974 to 1985, John held the role of secretary of the North Shore Council of Social Services (NSCSS). As a founding member of the Council, he joined other members of the executive in researching community needs on the North Shore, such as services for older people, youth, and people with disabilities.

John and Elsie Tillet wrote various position papers on these social issues and gave presentations to the Takapuna Council, including an early definition of community development developed by NSCSS. They argued that *'community development was about encouraging citizen participation in the social development of their local communities'*. It was a job that could hardly be done from Wellington; and if city councils were willing to support the development of recreation and sporting facilities, *'Then why not other community-building activities?'*³

John held the rare and privileged position of being on the executive of NSCSS and being elected as a city councillor for Takapuna City Council in 1979, a position he held for the next six years under the mayoralty of Fred Thomas. In his first term, he chaired a committee on unemployment, and a town planning committee. The planning committee made one of the most publicised decisions in the history of the North Shore, which was to grant consent for further development of the Centrepoint community in Albany. The commune had been founded as a charitable trust in 1977 by Bert Potter, and promoted intimate communal living along with personal and sexual freedom. Potter and others were later convicted on child sex abuse and drugs charges, and Centrepoint was shut down in 1999.

John was also a member of the Community Services Committee of North Shore City Council. Peggy Philips, Deputy Mayor, chaired the committee. In 1978, they prepared a discussion paper together about developing a Community Development Scheme.

NSCSS then wrote to the council supporting the idea, and published the following key points in its own newsletter for members across the Shore.

- Community action proceeds with the understanding and consent of its citizens.
- All citizens are able to use their abilities and realise their own aspirations.

- Citizens will use their intellectual and social capabilities for the welfare of others as well as themselves.
- There needs to be mutual trust and respect between groups of citizens, and between citizens and their elected representatives.
- Individual groups and organisations interact to deal with recurring problems and to meet new challenges.
- No section of community is oppressed by a sense of worthlessness and futility because of a feeling of being unacceptable to the in-groups of the community or because of a feeling of inability to influence the course of events.⁴

John never saw it as an obvious career move for him to be a city councillor; he credited it as being *'someone else's idea'* and not his. In fact, in 1983, he actually stood down so as to have more time to play golf. He told people that he didn't need to be on Council *'because I have no axe to grind with Council'*. This was just the reason his supporters told him was why they needed him there; and so he stood again, and was elected for a second term. In 1984 John organised a forum on community development and coordination.

In 1985 he stepped down as secretary for NSCSS. Elsie Tillet, then chairperson, paid tribute to his tremendous contribution to social services on the Shore, and for providing much of the foundational work for community development that the City Council had begun to do. John and Elsie were made life members of NSCSS in 1993.⁵

Mervyn Dine recalls that John often said he felt that he was a *'voice in the wilderness'* for his beliefs or opinions on poverty and injustice; for example, questioning why was it that youth were sleeping rough in Glenfield.

In Takapuna, an affluent suburb, poverty was not an issue but John believed there were many hidden issues people were not aware of. *There are relationships that we should be dealing*

with. While there may not be any visible need, there could be other things.

John also argued that social services were becoming too corporate, with a focus on human resources rather than on human relationships. *At present, collective responsibility has been very largely displaced by individual responsibility... greatly assisted by the use of the phrase Human Resources which seems to have replaced the phrase Men and Women (human beings)... Every person has a need for satisfying human relationships, for acceptance as a wanted and respected member of a community. Relating to others is the sine qua non [essential condition], of being human. It follows that the work of the social and community worker, paid or voluntary, cannot be fully accounted for in material terms, important though that financial aspect is.*⁶

John died in 2009, aged 97. Mervyn Dine took his service and interred John and Iris's ashes (who died in 2005), back home in the Avoca Valley.⁷

¹ *Stir gently for 100 years: The story of the Takapuna Methodist Church* [p. 30] Published, 1983

² Oral history interview with Mervyn Dine, 2015

³ *North Shore Council of Community and Social Services Inc. Te Runanga Ratonga Hapori o Te Raki pae-whenua: The History 1974 – 2014* [p. 15] Published 2014,

⁴ Ibid; page 19

⁵ Ibid, page 22

⁶ *Voluntary sector at the cross roads: A way forward*, North Shore Community and Social Services, 1999

⁷ This story has been published with the permission of John's son, Philip Osborne.

John, 1965

