Ten Years Anniversary: Sisters of St John of God Heritage Centre

By Paul Lane - Guest speaker
Opening of the Stories and Paintings: A Shared Kimberley History Exhibition
June 15th 2017

Acknowledgements and Thanks

Most modern Institutions will often spend a large part of their energy and their treasure in ensuring that “their story” and their public persona are in the image that the Institution has sought to project and often to seek a validation of their achievements and contributions to the society of which they have been a part.

This has not been the way of the Kimberley Sisters of St John of God!

As you revisit the Stories and Paintings Exhibition here tonight, we will have the opportunity to gain some small understanding, through photograph and paintings, of the nature of the partnership and family that the Kimberley Sisters of St John of God have with this part of the world, a place that we know as the Kimberley and with the people whose home this was and still remains.

The one hundred and twenty two (122) years since the St John of God Sisters arrived in Western Australia and one hundred and ten (110) years since the first of the Sisters arrived in the Kimberley paralleled the planning for and the creation of the State of Western Australia - from The Swan Colony to a State within the Commonwealth of Australia.

Established with Federation in 1901, the subsequent policies and related administrative actions of the State of Western Australia, particularly in relation to the treatment of Aboriginal people, would have a huge impact on the lives of the people in the Kimberley and the Sisters of St John of God who had come to work with those same people.

In 1907 when the Sisters arrived here in the Kimberley they became one of only three major Institutions that have subsequently remained and are still working in the Kimberley, for what is almost the entire history of the State of Western Australia – the other two being the State Government itself and the other the Roman Catholic Church.

This is a very unique claim that the Sisters can make and their contribution to the Kimberley Society can, in many respects, be judged as equally critical to the development of the Kimberley as either of the other two Institutions.

The Sisters established and operated our first schools, our first kindergartens, our first training Institutions for young women, our first nursing centres. The Sisters staffed the Government Leprosarium at Bungarun and many Regional hospitals and clinics.
The first Remote Mobile Community Nurses employed by the State of Western Australia, those whose task it was to travel to remote stations and communities and provide health services in the 1970s were from the ranks of the Sisters. I remember particularly Sister Damien Branigan who died tragically in a car accident while working as a community Nurse in 1973.

As with every story there will be judgements that each of us might make as to the achievements - beneficial or otherwise, of an institution and its members.

This inevitably will be the case in the historical assessment of the role of the Sisters in the Kimberley over the past century and indeed these same achievements will again be reassessed by fresh eyes and different value sets by future generations - That is the way of all historical assessment!

The Kimberley Sisters have taken a very different approach to putting forward their Kimberley Story for scrutiny and assessment!

The Sisters have sought to describe their Kimberley Journey in the context of their relationships with all those who have shared aspects of that journey, including those who have seen and understood the “shared journey” from a very different and not necessarily happy perspective.

Not every Kimberley Aboriginal person has seen their engagement with the Institutions of Colonisation in the same light.

Perhaps not every experience and engagement with the Sisters was as productive or rewarding for some people as that of many others whose lives were enhanced by the work of the Sisters? But the Sisters have not sought to avoid, to silence or ignore these aspects of the Story.

However there is one thing that has differentiated the Sisters of St John of God from many other Institutions that have played a role in the Kimberley Story!

The Sisters have been prepared to not only consider internally their performance and contribution in the Kimberley, but they have been prepared to put forward their own assessment of the achievements to the scrutiny and assessment of those whose lives were impacted by their engagement with the Sisters.

In particular the Sisters have been prepared to openly assess their participation in the enactment of the policies of Governments, in the knowledge that many of those policies and administrative actions of Governments have been condemned in multiple Royal Commissions and Inquiries over the past century.
This process of internal assessment has not been without the risk and such open analysis can and has caused pain and stress within their own Community of Sisters.

To confront these historical outcomes has required a courage that other Institutional participants in the enactment of policies of dispossession and assimilation have generally found themselves incapable of confronting with truth and honesty.

If any of us are in doubt as to the pain such endeavours can cause, a knowledge of the process that the Sisters imposed on their own Community in 1996, so as to prepare a united submission to the Stolen Generations “Bringing Them Home Report” would assist us to understand the courage that was demonstrated by the Kimberley Sisters at that time.

However the Sisters dealt with the matter in the spirit of Community and the courage displayed in that process was justly rewarded when the Sisters, as one, delivered their submission to the Commissioners at the hearings here in Broome with hundreds of the members of the Kimberley Stolen Generations sitting alongside the Sisters in solidarity and support.

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The unique aspect of telling “The Shared Kimberley History” that is manifested in the work and displays undertaken at the Sisters of St John of God Heritage Centre, through the Bungarun Archive Project and exhibitions like the “Stories and Paintings Exhibition” that we are revisiting tonight, is that we are all invited to participate in, learn from and contribute to the telling of the story.

In that learning, telling and contributing we are given the opportunity to place our particular perspective to the story and so to understand and to know the perspectives of others.

As Governments and other Institutions, that were created for a particular time and purpose in history, the Kimberley Sisters have come to a point in their journey where they have recognised, that with limited members, (albeit of sprightly good health), that it is time to engage with their friends and partners to plan for the future and a time when there are no longer any Sisters in the Kimberley.

There is now the need to explore how, in what manner and by whom the important work and values that have been the foundations of the Sisters work might be sustained into the future.

The Sisters have recently decided to initiate a process of Transition and Renewal for the Heritage Centre and the Bungarun Archive Project and planning steps are now being taken to ensure that the Shared History of the Kimberley Sisters and their Community Partners remains a Shared Journey.
The Sisters have determined that this task of Transition and Renewal will be underpinned by some very basic principles, albeit with some very complex challenges.

**The Principles for Transition and Renewal**

- **Honesty** - The Sisters and their team have sensitively and accurately developed a Centre where a critical part of the Kimberley Story can be put before us in all its complexity without relying on simplistic story telling or historical gloss to sensitise the issues.

- **Historical Value** – A Recognition that The Sisters of St. John of God in the Kimberley have devoted themselves for over a century in working with and for the people in the Kimberley and that their story is a key chapter in the post settlement period in this part of Australia.

- **Knowledge** - To create a resource for Western Australians that allows us to effectively understand our contemporary society through the lens of a complex and challenging historical framework.

- **Cultural Integrity** - That the values and cultural integrity of the Kimberley people can, in coming years be promoted and enhanced by the work undertaken by the St. John of God Heritage Centre in whatever institutional form that might be established for the future guidance and governance of the Project.

In coming days details of the process being undertaken by the Sisters and their Partners will be shared with the Kimberley Community and we are all encouraged to begin considering how we might assist in the Process of Transition and Renewal so that as many voices as possible might be heard and their views incorporated into the planning for the future role of the Heritage and Archive Centre.

This will be a whole of Community process! This is not simply about an Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal set of values or experiences!

Reflecting the concept of the Pomegranate with its multiple seeds, which has underpinned the work of the Sisters here in the Kimberley for over a century, there will be a place at the table for all who come with open hearts and a vision of a Shared Future for those who call the Kimberley home.

If I may just finish on this note which I promise will be brief?

When you are viewing the Exhibition tonight have a particular look at ‘The Natural Cathedral of Beauty’ - a set of three panels. While it is artistically very beautiful, for me it tells a more complex and a very unique aspect of the story that I have tried to convey to you tonight, however deficiently.
The usual symbols that often aspire to tell the stories of grand institutions, in these three panels are absent. There are no depictions of great monuments or historic architecture. There are no grand schools or convents or Centres of Medical excellence.

The three panels in their simplicity reflect that which has underpinned the history of the Kimberley Sisters and those values that they best represent –

- Engagement with the people and families with whom they served and shared their lives
- A love and respect for the beauty of the often harsh environment in which they worked
- A steadfast unlimited commitment to their faith and vocation through their fellowship as Kimberley Sisters of St. John of God.

Thank you for your patience!