

The Workings
of Jesus Christ
in the Life of
R.M.E.

Testimony of a
South African Quaker

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My first commitment to Christ came under the inspiration of the headmistress of my boarding school (Sherborne School for Girls in Dorset, England). It was an Anglican school and I was baptised and confirmed an Anglican. Whilst still at school, my own inner commitment to Christ seemed far greater than the church had a role for. I became hungry for something more than I was getting in Communion Service. So one holidays I decided to visit the local churches of my home town (Petersfield in Hampshire). The first one I came across was that of the "Religious Society of Friends, 'Quakers' Meeting for Worship 11 a.m. Sunday, All Welcome". So knowing no more than this, I went. During the hour and ten minutes we worshiped there was only one spoken ministry from the ten or twelve Friends present. I left the Meeting like a rabbit, bolting from its hole, vowing I would never go back! However the return to Holy Communion still left me dissatisfied and it came to me that something HAD happened in the Silence. I decided to try it again. Finally as a student in London, I joined Friends. (I might say I never went further in my denominational research!)

Before going to Bedford College in London, where I did Social Studies, I attended an International Weekend at the Friends Ambulance Unit just outside Petersfield. The main speaker was the Reverend Michael Scott. His quiet unemotional story of his ministry in South Africa reached straight into my heart. I KNEW that God wanted me to go to South Africa to live. I was then about eighteen, so this must have been about 1949/50. Although I was totally committed to living in South Africa, I did not get there until February 1954.

In the intervening years, the opposition of many good people but served to clarify my call. (My mother who was widowed during this period always gave me her full support.) I had no clear idea of what I wanted to do in South Africa — in fact I realized the job was not important, because I saw that outside criticism of the country was not helping to solve its problems. Even then I could see that if they were to be solved at all, it was necessary for me (and others like me) to live there, absorbing the conflicts of the situation into ourselves and then with the Grace of God, find the right solutions and the power to apply them. If someone like me could show that there were ways of resolving racial conflict in our own lives, then there would be a chance for others to find this way as well, and therefore a chance that the total situation could be redeemed. If however, people like me who are Christ-committed could NOT solve the conflicts, then no amount of outside criticism was going to help the people inside.

When I first came to South Africa, I worked with the Child Welfare Society in Port Elizabeth as a social worker. By the end of my first year, I had already met Talbot Elliott, and we were married and I came to live in the Citrus Farming area of the Sundays River Valley. This was 1955. A word about Talbot: although he is totally deaf and has been from birth, he is one of the most self-possessed and complete personalities I have ever met. He has amazing natural abilities in many practical fields, and these have not been blunted by over-education! He also reflects the

ongoing climate of opinion of the white community, which has caused us both some heartaches as we have come into conflict over various issues. This part of our relationship is not easy for either of us and we have both needed to draw on our reserves of affection for one another to overcome periods of deep-level divergence of commitment, which is a reflection of the total South African situation.

However this is not peculiar to just South Africa — the conflict of values. As I have slowly got to grips with the real issues, not only of the South African situation, but ones which have world-wide ramifications, I have come to see how difficult it is for every one of us to 'unstick' ourselves from our backgrounds in order to be objective. I have been greatly humbled by the knowledge that even I, who came to this country specifically to witness to the racial situation, have taken years to 'see' an issue. How can I presume to criticize those who were born with it, and are content with the situation in any case?

The next 'growing point' came after Sharpville, when the Catholic Archbishop of Durban called on the churches to fight racism. The two events stimulated my mind to analyze what was needed. Obviously it was not enough for church leaders to issue statements. Ordinary people must be involved. So I invited a few local people to come and meet and seek for ways in which we could 'express our Christian faith more effectively in our lives.' I called together anyone I thought might be interested, black, white and coloured. The response was mixed, some very enthusiastic and others not. Because I did not want this to be led by me, I suggested that if they were wanting to meet once a month, they should feel free to come. We set a time and date, but I said I would not remind anyone. For two months, Talbot and I put the chairs out on the first Monday of the month and no one came. (Talbot I might add was never keen on these meetings and always went to bed early.) I had had a strong feeling that if God wanted this thing, it was enough for me to provide the channel and he would use it. The third month, the coloured principal phoned to ask "Are you still having those meetings?" And I replied "Yes, if you come." And so we started with five of us and from this small beginning continued with one short break until 1977 when the Christian Institute was finally banned. When the Christian Institute started, we formed a close link with its leadership and the group has been a source of inspiration to them as well as they to us.

During those years, there was a time when I received a pressing invitation to join the Board of Management of the Christian Institute, but I received clear guidance that I was to keep my horizons limited to this community in which I lived. (I cannot deny I wasn't tempted to join this group of outstanding Christians, and feel the stimulus and encouragement of associating with people of like mind and spirit.) In my heart I knew that the problem is not to tell people that they are wrong, but to show how the ordinary person can live out Christ's teaching in day to day situations.

Then it was I had this stunning revelation: it is so obvious that it really may not seem like a revelation at all! We blamed the Nationalist

government for the legal entrenchment of apartheid in South Africa, but there was nothing at all to prevent us from paying decent wages to our farm staff or providing them with better living conditions. I suddenly saw how my 'good works' (voluntary relief work and other social projects) had been at the expense of the men who worked for us. Then I saw that what we were fighting was not to be found in a specific political party or government or 'other' group of people, it was to be found in ourselves. So often, we who think of ourselves with pride as liberals, are totally indistinguishable 'in the field' from our less 'enlightened' neighbours! I felt humbled and ashamed.

One of the problems of this little group of people who met regularly was that it seemed to 'ritualise' its relationships. We kept everything on a nicely 'spiritual' plane and carefully skirted the real issues. Yet several young black people continued to find something of value, as I suppose we all did. It was the only channel of communication between the different population groups. During this period the group organized a number of occasions, one of which was a three-race, three-language Nativity Play.

A very real blockage in the way of any real progress in building up new patterns of relationship in the community is the resistance of two of the white, English speaking churches to racially mixed worship. The Catholics have always worshiped together and they use two languages in their Mass. When Friends could not obtain the local Women's Institute Hall for our Meetings for Worship, because our Meetings were mixed, it was the young Catholic priest who offered us the use of the Catholic church for our once a month Meeting for Worship — surely an unique arrangement! (Two deaths have stopped this little Meeting.)

I feel that the conservative white community successfully 'sealed off' the little Christian Institute group from bringing about effective changes in the local community. Time went by and we lost initiative and direction. Then God took over, and through the miraculous recovery of a young woman from a devastating car smash in which her husband was killed, this mother of four young children, had a most marvelous encounter with the power of the Holy Spirit, and she came back home renewed in both body and soul. It is from the little charismatic group which started in her home, that the Holy Spirit began moving into the lives of other whites in the Valley, opening their hearts and minds to the knowledge and love of God. And so, from quite an unlooked for quarter new life and direction came.

Even so we encounter periods of setbacks. It is obvious that even the infilling of the Holy Spirit into one's life, does not automatically turn one into a saint or magically change all attitudes overnight, nor does it solve all problems. In fact a spiritual awakening often creates many more problems. The initial encounter with the Holy Spirit brings tremendous joy and spiritual elation, but soon God requires that one faces up to some situation — either within or without, and if we find it too difficult or too painful, we may refuse. The days go by and the Light goes out of our lives. We feel utterly bereft and assume it was just an

emotional interlude, not meant to last. Yet I am sure that the joy is meant to last, as we learn more ways to love and we open up more and more of our lives to Him. To regain it, we have to go back to the point we lost Him. It may have seemed an insignificant little issue or it may have been a very special Calvary that was required of us. When we return, we find God waiting for us with joy — in fact He meets us 'while we are yet a long way off.'

The big problem with this charismatic group is to reach the white community and maintain the unity of the Spirit with black community, — or since there is practically no 'unity of the Spirit' with the blacks, at least not exclude them. My own role in this was to ask the charismatic group to accept that meetings should be open to *all*. This caused much heart-searching, and since that time, some of those who came regularly stopped coming. Yet we received reassurance from another young woman — one who admitted to being very anti-black before — that we ARE all one in Christ and should accept one another unconditionally. This young woman opened out a new ministry by her loving and direct approach and her readiness to ask forgiveness of those she has hurt. She has helped in the healing of many deep-level hurts and bitter feelings, especially in the coloured community, which I had not only been powerless to touch, but because of unfulfilled expectations, from the Christian Institute group, I have actually aggravated, unwittingly but nevertheless just as really.

I would like to admit here of some rather mixed feelings at the human level, when I saw the power which God was giving to these other younger women, who had not been noticeably religious before and yet now could speak and act with such conviction. I had a new insight into the elder brother of the prodigal son — very salubrious too!

A new Anglican minister and his wife arrived in June 1975, both supportive of the charismatic group, but from a strong Anglican base. This troubles us because we have always been so unselfconsciously non-denominational, that this Anglican emphasis has broken down long-established relationships.

This is some of the background at the community level in which we live and seek to find out God's will for us. At the intellectual level, which requires that we try and understand the powers and forces at work in our society, I have begun to see how tremendously entrenched is the status quo: how power and financial wealth go hand in hand; how political government is no longer the real source of power; and how labour, through Trade Unions seeks to confront the hidden and unseen power source. We do not see the often devastating effects which big business has had on the lives of communities and nations. Most of us have no idea how these financial power blocks operate, we have no idea of the incredible profits they make. We do not know who accumulates this wealth nor how it is used to manipulate politicians and governments.

I mention this because slowly I am beginning to trace the roots of wealth-draining mechanisms from our own farm upwards, out of our community to the pockets of various big companies — fertilizer, poison-

sprays; mechanical implement manufacturers and so on. Just one example: we are pressured by advertising and technical advice to change to ever more 'efficient' (and more expensive) machines and poisons to do the work of our labour. So we might spend, say R5,000 on a machine to do the work of five men. That means that money is tied up for years and no longer available to promote the wealth and well-being of our community in the form of higher wages and better working conditions. But at the same time the farmer is caught in a pattern of relationships with the men who work for him, which enables them to exist together with the lowest possible expectations from each other. Wages are low, productivity and responsibility also. Yet to break this pattern and establish something which requires more from both 'sides' is every bit as difficult as changing white attitudes and perceptions. So the divisions between employer and men are intensified, and the wealth of the valley goes elsewhere.

I do not want to elaborate on a very difficult subject. I do want to say that the capitalist system which has given rise to this evil, is not to be condemned in its entirety. We should recognize that it has enabled the intricate combining of men, money and materials in the most efficient way ever yet devised and so has enabled the West to create the most marvellous technology and development of resources that the world has ever seen. What I am feeling my way towards is that in the process society itself has been dehumanized, and in order to get to grips with the problems of sharing of wealth and power, we need to understand the way the present system enables it to be concentrated into the hands of the unseen few.

One local issue has given me the opportunity to test out my insight that people need to face up to national and international conflict at the local level and work on it where the spiritual qualities of love, understanding, and courage can be best channelled into a conflict. I would say that time has shown that I have completely failed.

The issue arose out of the need for Friends to have a public venue for Meeting for Worship, which we wanted to hold monthly. The only suitable venue was the local Women's Institute Hall. It became a real conflict situation at the classic level of where Christians SHOULD be fighting conflict — in the hearts and minds of ourselves and those around us. The local white Establishment resisted every attempt to make it face the issue. Each month I would go to the W.I. meeting thinking THIS time we will thrash it out, and each time a very good reason was given which postponed it. (Seeking legal advice; writing to the Department of Community Development for its ruling on the use of the hall; seeing there were no toilet facilities for 'nonwhites'(!); and finally that we should wait until the land on which the hall is built is transferred into the name of the Women's Institute — it is state owned at present). Each month those, who in theory supported the opening of the hall for 'mixed' meetings sank back with relief that the issue was postponed, and I could see everyone was becoming bored by it. They could blame me (conveniently) for keeping the issue alive and 'making trouble.' Only I

tried not to 'make trouble.' Before each meeting, I would spend three or four nights in prayer and meditation, seeking 'the mind of God.' The issue was first raised by me in 1968, when 34 people voted against letting Friends use the hall for Meeting for Worship and 12 supported us. In 1975, after the growth of the little charismatic group I requested that the matter should be reconsidered and I told them about the degradation of the coloured community, whose only 'relaxations' are drink and sex, but, I said "God has moved into the lives of many of these people and is redeeming them. He is also redeeming the lives of many whites and giving a new sense of purpose. One day it will be right for us to join together in prayer, could we use the Hall, or if God knocks on the door, will we say to him, 'We have nothing against You personally, we just don't like your low class friends!'" And then I sat down. The chairwoman and I had agreed that people should think about it a month. So the next month when she got up and said "Arising out of the minutes, your committee feels that the time is not yet ripe for multi-racial meetings in the Hall." I thought "Oh God, we are back where we started." I had prepared myself in prayer for this meeting, but had understood it was not for me to speak. Then a woman got up and said "Madam chair, 26 years ago, Mrs. A. Elliott (my mother-in-law) asked if we could have a Coloured choir at the Nativity play, we were told 'Yes provided they stand outside and sing through the windows.' So we had no choir. Times are changing, and it is time we change too." Many people agreed with these sentiments, but once again the issue was successfully side-tracked and shelved. In 1977 I began full-time work for Quaker Service Fund as social worker, and resigned from the Women's Institute, and I cannot help feel I left the field of battle before the fight. I do not see my way to returning to the Women's Institute especially as they have devised a new constitution which specifically says it is only for whites.

Because I have been so conscious of the power of this social and economic inertia to prevent change, I cast around in my mind for some practical way we could try to create a new relationship with the people on our own farm. There were two problems to this. Firstly, Talbot, who like many farmers, would like better service but is not prepared to accept his staff as responsible men; secondly, the men themselves, who through a life-time of hurts and slights, have devised a protective mechanism which gives them maximum protection but minimum expectation.

The rising cost of food seemed to provide a good excuse and I linked this with the suggestion that we could usefully combine in a cooperative effort to grow vegetables for all the families on the farm. Talbot was agreeable to let us have the ground and that I should speak to the men. I explained the idea as simply as possible and they requested time to talk it over. The following week they came back with a request that Talbot should plant mealies (corn) or wheat for them. Talbot said "No, the mealies get stolen." Also the land was not sufficient for either mealies or wheat. I was horrified to see how everyone had fallen into the

old pattern of you/us. "That *you* should plant the mealies for us." I had stressed the cooperative effort. However they were adamant that it should be mealies or nothing. So knowing that it is important not to force my ideas but encourage other people too, I approached Talbot and suggested that if they bought the seed, he could plant it. However the men refused to buy the seed, saying Talbot could do that, have the grain processed and AFTERWARDS they would buy it from him.

During the three weeks or so of this discussion, Dina Mangali, who works for us in the kitchen, but who is also a friend, councillor and a person with a vision of her own, said "Don't you worry if the men won't do anything. You tell them you want to speak to their wives — the men don't know what we women want to cook." And so it turned out, the wives were enthusiastic and in September 1974 we started growing vegetables together. We all work together, weeding, hoeing and planting. Some women are lazy, others keen. With one break, we have been growing vegetables each year since.

One of the first problems we encountered was the dividing up of the crop. I had thought we should divide according to the number in each family. We talked it over and this was agreed to initially. Then the next week, after we had made our division, Dina said "I am not satisfied. I work as hard as everyone else and if I don't get the same (she and I had no children at home and were getting the least) it will make me lazy." My heart sank and I thought sadly, "Oh dear, she has missed the whole point." Rather glumly, we re-divided the onions, and I picked up my clump and turned for home. Dina picked up her clump and immediately re-divided it and gave half of it to the two mothers with the biggest families. My heart sang with joy, (I also felt a complete fool!) but what a marvellous object lesson she had taught us all. She had grasped the essentials better than I had.

Things did not always go smoothly, and I began to realize that just as there is resistance to change from everyone — the old ways have worked and are 'safe', I also realized that old thought-patterns have cut deep into the minds of people, until it is virtually impossible for them to imagine things any different. This practical working together, released something and provided a non-verbal medium of communication between us. It allowed for the expression of hidden skills and knowledge also. Finally it called for discipline and exchange of ideas in coping with practical problems like the women who would turn up on the days there was something to share, but not on the days there was work to be done!

We have had a Quaker Service Fund committee in the Valley since 1961. The rest of the committee is Anglican, Catholic and sometimes Methodist. The main work has been amongst African widows and orphaned children and involves the distribution of food rations to totally destitute families. One of the main problems has been that while white and coloured widows with children can obtain Maintenance Grants from the government, black women could not. And often when their husbands died, they would not only lose their income, but their home as well, as farmers often needed the house for another labourer.

After many years of battle, we finally managed to get the government to agree to help these women, and much of my work has been to enable these women to apply for Maintenance Grants. It has been very frustrating and time-consuming work, resulting in 1976 with a Quaker delegation to Pretoria to submit Memoranda to the Department of Bantu Affairs concerning the problems of the provision of welfare for the black community. This delegation was favourably received and much red tape and confusion was cleared up. This enabled me to work full time during 1977 to try and catch up with the backlog of families who were eligible for government assistance. However I felt this work was largely negative and involved me with a kind of mopping up operation, dealing with the end result of a sick and maladjusted society. The work was necessary, but did not make for a better community with more fulfilled people.

I thought about this for some time and thanks to the insights of a couple of Catholic women, I began to see that if we are to have a growing, evolving society, we need growing, evolving people, who are fully developed in finding their full potential. The economic recession was also a problem. Finally I thought that we should try to utilize locally available raw materials to make things which would be immediately useful to the maker, and if useful to the maker then possibly to her neighbours, and finally to a wider public. So I started experimenting with river-reeds, grasses, palm-leaves, sisal and string (a by-product from the citrus co-op). I then approached the local black community and after a period of ups and downs, we now have a group of women making sisal sandals, sleeping mats (traditional, but useful for beach mats and hangings), table-mats, handbags, and anything else people can think up. It is fun, we have the use of the grounds of the black Anglican church and sit on the shady side in the summer and in the sun when it is cold. Our technology couldn't be simpler and the total capital outlay initially was 5c per person for a special needle!

I am still aware of the great gulfs between the different population groups and know that in Christ we are one, but find very few people are interested in experiencing this and enabling Christ to bring us together. Since the Christian Institute was banned, there has been no formal contact between the different Christian groups, and so I suggested we try to come together as representatives of the various churches to share with one another God's work through each denomination and at the personal level in our own lives. I also suggested that we should share areas in our community which needed God's help in some special way, and then we should pray about it. There have been four meetings in this series, but nothing which can be called an ongoing fellowship. I am the only one who provides the continuity, and although I have come to see that God has resources far greater than any one person or denomination can even begin to conceive, these resources, if shared and known, can be drawn upon by everyone. However it is uphill work, especially with the clergy, who I suspect feel such ideas may seem a threat.

In sharing this hodge-podge of faith, vision, activity and failure, I

would like to end with what I have come to feel is the key to our ongoing life in Christ. Firstly, He is a spirit at work in the world, and if we make ourselves available to Him, we can become a channel for His love to reach out and heal. He NEEDS us in the dark places of this world. He needs our total personality — heart, mind and body. This is a slow process, involving us in discipline, self-sacrifice and the need for constant re-commitment to the Way of Love. Love is always creative and positive and looks for ways to be expressed. It flows between people and cannot exist in a vacuum. Love is for everyone, not just the poor and needy, but the rich and powerful as well — only they think they can do without it. I do not think there is any one system which is 'right,' neither do I think that the end ever justifies the means. The means we use, determine the end which is achieved, so that the Way of Love immediately excludes many of the possible responses to a conflict situation — you cannot kill or use violence, you cannot even legislate for righteousness, for this comes from within. However there are some activities which generate more love than others. There are laws which promote more justice than others — and justice is one of the attributes of God. The great need of our times is to create the kind of institutions which enable people to participate in things and decisions which concern them. People need to be responsible and fulfilled. They are the greatest 'natural resource' in the world. And so secondly, I have come to see that we are part of an ongoing creation, which as Teilhard de Chardin suggests, has a direction, but does not ensure us personally of success. Life is not a bunch of flowers where everyone is picked perfect. It is (in Teilhard's analogy) more like a tree, whose leaves can be ripped off in a storm, eaten by insects or blemished by a disease, but which continues to live, grow and bear fruit. We seek for reassurance that we are being successful, but I don't think we can ever be reassured in this way. We need to see that death is a part of life, and that if we are to achieve the kind of harmony which we sense is being offered to us in the Kingdom of God, then in death, each one of us becomes part of the cycle of life. We can see this in nature, we also experience it when we eat, especially the meat eaters amongst us. We live because another creature has died. (We therefore need to eat with reverence and thanksgiving, making sure that animals do not die in vain.) What we eat becomes transformed onto a higher plane as it is incorporated into ourselves and we change the energy into work, creative activities and finally qualities of the spirit. When Jesus died on the Cross, He showed how this spiritual energy is further released into the world. The love He showed was for people. It was love which radiates out from God into His whole creation. We are part of Him when we allow love to flow through us to people, and one of the exciting parts of this kind of loving is the knowledge that we become fulfilled in one another.

There are times when things seem so dark and hopeless. In such times the following passages from the Bible have come to have great significance for me.

Isaiah I v 15-17 "When you lift your hands in prayer I will not look

at you. No matter how much you pray, I will not listen for your hands are covered with blood. Wash yourselves clean. Stop all this evil that I see you doing. Yes, stop doing evil and learn to do right. See that justice is done — help those who are oppressed, give orphans their rights, and defend widows." (There are many other passages in the prophets which speak directly to the world today. Disaster and war continue to overtake us because we fail to follow the Way which God provided.) Jesus wept over Jerusalem for the same reason in St. Luke chapter XX v 42. He says "If you only knew today what is needed for peace! But now you cannot see it. The time will come when your enemies will surround you with barricades, blockade you, and close in on you from every side. They will completely destroy you and the people within your walls: not a single stone will they leave in its place, BECAUSE YOU DID NOT RECOGNIZE THE TIME WHEN GOD CAME TO SAVE YOU." And in about A.D. 70 this came devastatingly true.

Yet God offers us so much, and alongside every prophecy of doom in the Old Testament comes the most beautiful promise of how God saves. Jeremiah XXXI v 33 is a good example of this. God says, "The New Covenant that I will make with the people of Israel will be this: I will put my law WITHIN them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people. None of them will have to teach his fellow countryman to know the Lord, because all will know me, from the least to the greatest."

When one realizes that 2000 years ago this promise was fulfilled in Jesus and that down all the centuries since His death, we continue to make the same mistakes and reap the same horrors and distress, we need to take hold again with our own inner understanding just what God has given us through Jesus Christ. St. Paul has a great deal on this, in Jesus we see how God lives and works in the world, St. Paul explains how people filled with His nature should be living together. In Colossians Ch I v 27 St. Paul writes "God's plan is to make known his secret to his people, this rich and glorious secret which he has for all peoples. And the secret is that Christ is in you." In verse 10 he says "Then you will be able to live as the Lord wants and will always do what pleases Him. Your lives will produce all kinds of good deeds, and you will grow in your knowledge of God." And he goes on to share his vision that in Christ, all Creation is being brought into oneness.

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