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Still hoping in a Brand New Day

Bill Christie CSSp

For one hot Saturday it was the year 1965 again inside Beagle Bay's Sacred Heart Church. Ladies, wearing pill-box hats and gloves, stood and fanned themselves next to men in brightly checked shorts made of rayon. The Church was full — at least the north side was. The south was full of cameras and boom mikes and play back machines and hair-dressers and lights and lights and more lights. A choir stood by the altar and sang. A preacher stood and called the people to prayer.

For a day I saw what it must have been like when Beagle Bay and Sacred Heart Church were the centre of religious life for the Aboriginal people of northwest Australia. When people had hope in a Brand New Day breaking like the dawn from on high. When their feet knew where they stood and their eyes knew where they were looking. When the future was bright like sunlight reflected from the chrome fins of majestic cars gliding like sharks on currents of newly paved roads.

But at four in the afternoon the assistant director called the day a “wrap” and it all vanished. Lights, lights and still more lights went into one truck and sound equipment into another.

The choir packed it in. The preacher took off his robes and became a working actor again, asking what the call sheet had listed for tomorrow.

People turned in their costumes, returned to the shorts and t-shirts of their daily lives and then went home for the day.

They even took their rubbish with them, including the seven empty cans of hairspray that had been whipped out at every break in the shooting to keep the beehive hairdos arching to the sky.

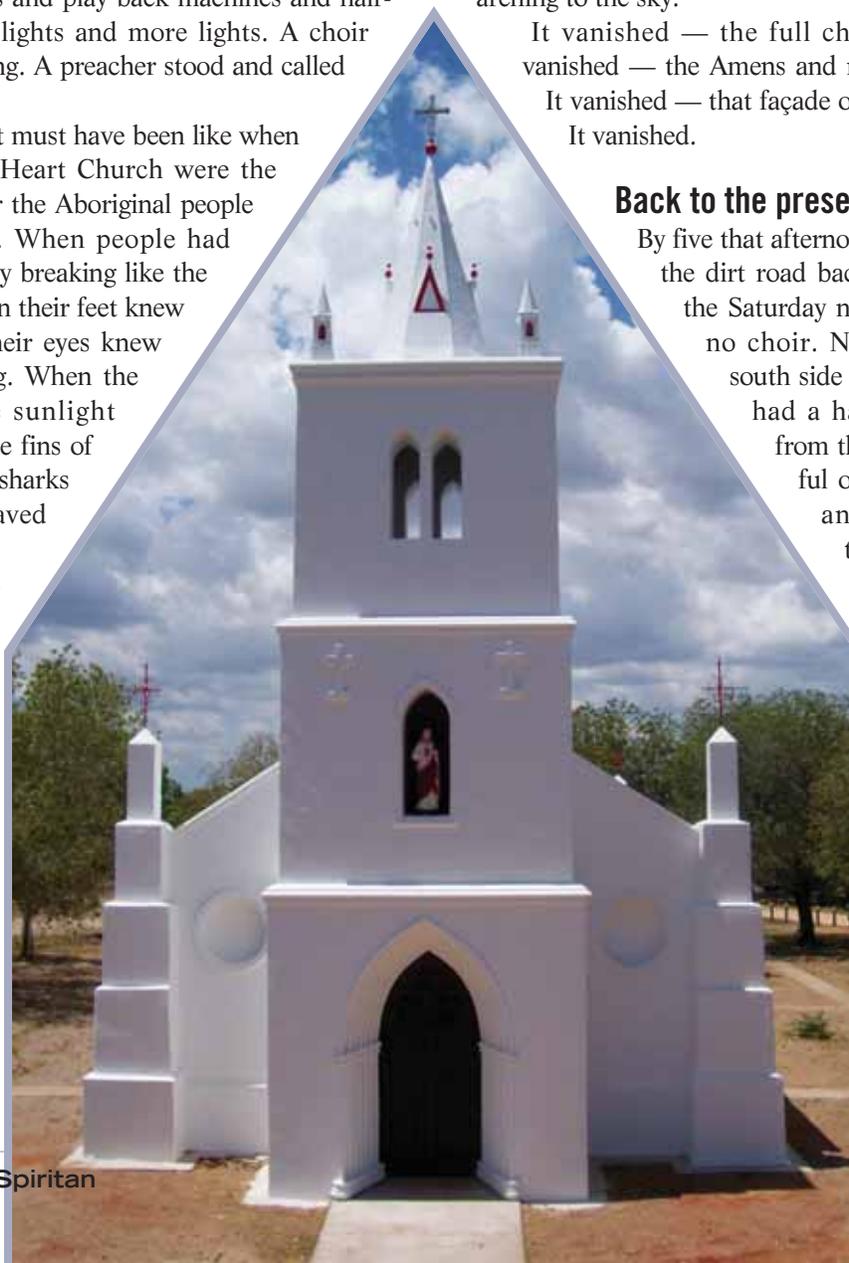
It vanished — the full church and the singing. It vanished — the Amens and roar of the black preacher.

It vanished — that façade of hope in a brand new day. It vanished.

Back to the present

By five that afternoon the last truck was down the dirt road back to town and we started the Saturday night vigil Mass. There was no choir. Neither the north nor the south side of the church was full. We had a handful of white teachers from the Catholic school, a handful of local folks, mostly older, and a few little kids with their grandmothers. No more than fifteen in total.

And we prayed. Not fake movie prayers. No, we prayed real prayers for real people with very real problems. The Amen was muted. It was more like a groan than a roar, but it carried real faith, faith that had



Sacred Heart Church,
Beagle Bay.

been shaken and tattered, but had still hung on stubbornly.

Jimmy Chi, a local man from this remote northwest corner of Australia, wrote *Bran Nue Day* (Brand New Day) in the late 1980s when Aborigines were fighting for land rights, citizenship and equal rights. It was also the day they would throw off the mantle of the Church's authority over them.

Sacred Heart Mission was created in the 1880s. French Trappist monks, the first to serve the mission, were replaced by German Pallotine Missionaries in 1901. Soon the mission was home to the local Aborigines and to "half-caste" children taken from their Aboriginal mothers and sent to either government or church-run orphanages. A monastic-style routine pervaded each day.

The wrapping paper, not the prize

In the 1950s the government promised them citizenship and the Church promised them its mission lands. They could set their own course into the second half of the 20th century. They reached for the prize, but got only the wrapping paper. The reins of power were never really handed over. They got back some small part of their land — if someone else was not already using it or if there wasn't anything valuable on it, near it, or under it, then or at some future date.

Cattle stations were handed over to community groups that knew how to drive herds, but knew nothing of overseas markets, exchange rate hedging, or capital expenditures. When the stations went bankrupt the groups were blamed. Many believed that and blamed themselves. Welfare cheques came, together with a government home you could never own — even though the land was yours. A community store was set up. It could sell you bread for \$5 a loaf, baked a month before in a city well over 1,000 kms away, and defrosted that week. You could leave and try your luck in the city competing for a job against its citizens — in their culture, in their language and on their turf.

Recapturing hope

Bran Nue Day is about hope. There isn't much of that around Beagle Bay now. We have pretty much lost a generation to frustration, self-loathing and despair, resulting in alcoholism, drug abuse, violence and suicide. In the late 1980s Jimmy Chi wanted to remind people of the hope they once had and needed again if they were to make a better go of things in the future.



Bill Christie CSSp in front of the altar at Sacred Heart Church.

School, which is at its very root a statement of hope in the future, has only about 50% attendance in our community. Church is more than ever fundamentally centred on faith in a loving and caring God who is active in personal, family and community life. That faith is the basis for real Christian hope — a hope that believes God has been with them and will continue to walk beside them. But that hope now is no stronger than a bruised reed or a smoldering wick.

Why are they reviving Jimmy Chi's play as a major movie? Do I dare say it's about hope again? This year the Prime Minister stood in Parliament and said sorry on behalf of the government and the nation for the injustices carried out upon the Aboriginal people of Australia.

Here in Beagle Bay a new fight has begun for the land and the environment. Huge natural gas reserves have been discovered off our coast. Do we dare to hope?

A Church that stayed

As a Church we stand ready. We're not really sure what our next step will be, but the first battle has been won — we didn't run away when things got bad, when the fabric of the community unraveled and our churches and schools emptied out. We didn't have and still don't have an answer for the violence, but

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we stayed and nursed the people as best we could. We didn't have and still don't have an answer for the drugs or alcohol, but we've stayed and helped the grandparents cope with children that their own children couldn't care for. Dear God, we have no answer for the young lives lost to suicide, but we've stayed and buried the dead and cried with the living.

We believe in a *Bran Nue Day*. It will come. It must come. The promise ultimately isn't about governments or policies. They can delay the promise and make the journey more painful, but they can't kill the hope. It isn't about alcohol or drugs. They can blur the vision, but not blot it out. Even death can't defeat the promise. For the promise is in God's very self — it is the Sacred Heart of his Son: love poured out for all people — for the people of Beagle Bay always and forever. ■

Courtesy of *One Heart, One Spirit* newsletter, USA Spiritans.