



The Spirit of Things

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Transcript:

*The Waiters' Union
Sunday 25 September 2005*

Summary

The Waiters' Union was founded as a non-formal network of spiritually minded activists who serve the homeless and the needy in the streets of West End in Brisbane.

SONG: Jesus for Prime Minister

Rachael Kohn: His politics are way to the Left, but Dave Andrews believes that's where Jesus would be.

Hello, and welcome to the third in our three-part series, Monks, Nuns and Waiters, Full Time Faith, 24/7. I'm Rachael Kohn and you're with The Spirit of Things on ABC Radio National.

SONG

Rachael Kohn: 'How can you worship a homeless man on Sunday and ignore one on Monday?' That challenge is at the heart of an unusual community of Christians who share their story with me today. They break with the pattern of a formal and exclusive group, and they live the gospel through the eyes of the poor. They're The Waiters' Union, founded by Dave and Ange Andrews and they're actually part of a wave that the Evangelical Christian magazine, Christianity Today, calls 'the new monasticism'. I spoke to them in their house, in West End, Brisbane.

Ange and Dave, welcome to The Spirit of things.

Both: Thanks very much.

Rachael Kohn: Dave, the Waiters' Union makes me thinking of an organisation for people who wait on tables. I gather that isn't what the Waiters' Union is really about.

Dave Andrews: Well in some ways, it is, because a lot of what we do is create a space to welcome people and provide hospitality. But the original idea was that the Waiters' Union would be a group of people living in the neighbourhood who'd wait on God, and wait on their neighbours, be available, helping out, living out our spirituality in simple practical ways of supporting people in the neighbourhood.

Rachael Kohn: The neighbourhood is West End, Brisbane. Is it really a need of this kind of hospitality more than other places in Brisbane?

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Dave Andrews: Not necessarily more than other places in Brisbane. I mean in fact West End has a great tradition of hospitality.

At the centre of West End is Musgrave Park, which has always been a traditional meeting ground for indigenous people. And then there have been lots of hostels and boarding houses that have always welcomed people who have been moving into the city, and in fact we're kind of continuing that tradition of hospitality in what we're doing. But what we're trying to do is train people to live a lifestyle of openness to other people, support to other people so that as they learn to live that way of life, they can go to other places around Australia, outback, up north, or go overseas and be involved in doing a similar kind of work with the poorest of the poor in the slums of Asia.

Rachael Kohn: Ange, you actually grew up here in West End, didn't you?

Ange Andrews: I did and I really, really love it as well.

Rachael Kohn: Is the kind of work you do here in West End, the place you grew up in, at odds with the way you grew up? I mean is it a challenge for you to be doing this kind of work with the homeless in the very neighbourhood that you grew up in?

Ange Andrews: In some ways yes, and in some ways no, because my Mum and Dad actually set a tradition in their Greek community; they tried to live out a different way of living in the family and in their community. And my father did a lot of work with the homeless, and welcoming them into his café in the city that he had, and they always got first priority every morning, having breakfast first, before anybody else. He'd go and collect them all, and that's only one of the things that my Dad did, and my family have a strong tradition of that.

Rachael Kohn: Well you both spent some time in Asia, quite a bit of time in India. That was in the '70s. Was it part of the sort of hippie move towards India to find inspiration?

Dave Andrews: In those days, people said orientation is where the Orient is, so if you really want to get orientated to the world, you needed to go to the Orient. And we made it our pilgrimage too.

We first went to Afghanistan and then we caught up in the civil war there and had to leave and found ourselves in India, and we lived in India for 12, 13 years, and we were part of an intentional community there that was dedicated to following the way of Christ, but operated not as a Christian community but a community of people from various traditions and religions, including Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, and together we tried to ask the question, What does the radical compassion of Christ say to us as a group of people from these different traditions and religions? How can we respond to the challenge that he fleshed out in his life? What would it mean for us to try to not just be familiar with his teachings but actually flesh out his teachings in our own life?

Rachael Kohn: Dave, weren't you the son of a Baptist pastor? Why didn't you follow the way of Christ in the Baptist church?

Dave Andrews: I am the son of a Baptist pastor, and I derived from my parents a legacy in the faith which I'm profoundly grateful for. And like Ange's parents, my Mum and Dad lived out their faith in a way that was very open and compassionate, and had a huge impact on us. But I think that when we went to India, we realised that the Christians had no monopoly on Christ, or Christlikeness, that in fact the more dedicated we were to living out the way of Christ, the more we recognised Christ-likeness in other traditions and religions, and found ourselves in a position where we needed to learn from our Buddhist and Hindu and Muslim friends about what it meant for us to become more Christ-like.

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Ange Andrews: It's not only in religious traditions, but people that don't say that they have a religious tradition that we can learn so much and be challenged by in terms of being more authentic in our own belief.

Rachael Kohn: What were the sort of things that you were involved in, in India? I mean you were actually there at the time when Indira Gandhi was assassinated; did you find yourself in the midst of that conflict.

Ange Andrews: Yes, we were in the middle of it. In fact last night I had a big debate with my daughter and another young girl that was part of that whole thing when she was a child, and last night they wanted to discuss that very issue, what happened then, and why did we intervene, and why did we take a Sikh into our home and hide the guy in our home? And they couldn't understand why we would be jeopardising their situation of safety.

Then Dave and that girl's father went out to try and stand between the Sikhs that were being harmed by the people that were reacting and trying to kill them, and they were just talking last night about how they thought that that was madness because they were children, and they didn't want to actually have their parents die and I didn't want Dave to go either.

Dave Andrews: And I remember that conversation; they were saying to Ange, 'Look, we looked out the window and mobs of people were chasing down Sikhs because a Sikh had killed the Prime Minister, and people were in the backlash, slaughter the Sikhs. But I said, 'If it was your father, or your husband, or your son, wouldn't you want somebody to intervene?' And I can remember at the time Ange said, 'Yes, of course I would.' The framework for a global ethic is recognising we're all part of the same family, and realising that we've got that responsibility. Am I my brother's keeper? Yes, I am, because I'm part of the same family, and that was an impulse to respond, to intervene, and to save some people's lives. And that was I think highly significant.

Rachael Kohn: I guess it raises the question of the demands of this kind of life and this kind of work on the family. Where the radical compassion is directed. If it's directed outside of the family, does the family suffer? What kind of a challenge was it for you, to maintain a family life that's stable and that survives?

Ange Andrews: That's a big question, because I was saying to Dave this morning that I was painfully aware of the complexity of raising normal children within abnormal environments, but I think that now, in our society, it's very complex, and that we need to teach the children not to be unaware of the issues as well. And to know how to actually work within society and address very difficult problems.

So there's this big tension between me being completely devoted to help in every possible way, but at the same time being totally aware of the fact that I wish the same thing for other people and I know it's nothing like that for most people in the world. So I've actually tried to walk a tightrope between those two polarities.

Dave Andrews: But I think there was something that was very important for Ange and I was to recognise that if we were committed to love and justice, we had to start with our kids, and work it out with our kids. And give our kids a sense that the revolution begins with them, in our care for them. So that rather than sacrificing them for the sake of the cause, we said 'The most beautiful thing that we could pass on to you is the way that we live our lives.' And so what we want to do is model that with you in the way that we care for you, and then show you how to do that for others.

Rachael Kohn: Well you obviously returned from India to West End, Brisbane, eventually did set up the Waiters' Union, to continue the kind of work you had done in India?

Dave Andrews: We came back and we set up the Waiters' Union. We tried to do it in a way that reflected a global commitment, with a concern for a whole range of people of different traditions and religions, with a commitment to justice, struggle for change, and with a concern

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to actually flesh that out in our own neighbourhood here and our own backyard, and to train people on how to work with disadvantaged groups, so that they could do that here, but also they'll be able to go to overseas and do it as well.

Rachael Kohn: Give me an idea of the kind of projects that you've undertaken.

Dave Andrews: OK. When we arrived here, we decided that rather than set up a welfare agency working for people, so that we'd become professionals and they would become clients, that in fact we needed to develop a community network that would include people, and treat people as our friends. So we've developed networks of relationships in which we've tried to develop a culture of trust, so that the struggles that people have, that they carry deep down, they have confidence to raise to the surface, and we can talk about them. And we've tried to join with them around those issues of struggles.

And so we tried to join in with local Aboriginal people around issues of struggles that they have, around stolen wages, and tried to join with refugees who arrive here and who are often not welcomed, and we've tried to provide places of welcome for them, and supports for them.

Our son-in-law actually runs a workers' co-operative that generates employment for refugees, and Ange has got a lot of involvement with refugees, providing supports and resources for them, and we also work with people with physical, intellectual and psychiatric disabilities in hostels and boarding houses around the neighbourhood, doing everything from support groups to peer counselling, to crisis intervention and help.

Rachael Kohn: How do you support your work? I mean it's great to be doing this but how do you support it? Where do you get your crust?

Ange Andrews: I'm actually hired by the Baptist Union of Queensland to do some work to set up certain projects within our local community, so that's enough just to cover our costs and then the rest of it is all voluntary and with a lot of other volunteers.

My whole approach is people from all professions coming forward and giving some time, not unlimited time, but some time towards addressing a certain issue in their community in Brisbane, or in our local community here. And I do a lot of linking, so I would say the way that we do it is thousands and thousands of dollars worth of time, energy and resources, comes from those people, and we could never do what we're doing without all those people.

Rachael Kohn: Ange, in what way have you been involved personally with people who have real difficulty living and making friends and keeping a job. How does it involve you personally?

Ange Andrews: I mean my approach is having a one-to-one contact with people and welcoming them into my home and into my personal space, trying to really be out of the friendship and seeing things grow in people, let the problems emerge that they're facing and then try to address those as best I can, and walking alongside them, not as somebody that is over them, and then also drawing in a lot of other interested, good people out there in the community that can be part of that, and sort of alleviating their suffering.

There's one woman that I've been involved with for the last three years; it was a case of being a homeless person that lived in the city, she became my neighbour just down the road. I got involved with her, and then my daughter and her girlfriends were involved with her also.

Rachael Kohn: What sort of problems is she coping with?

Ange Andrews: At the time in the beginning she was having problems even bathing, so we used to go down and bath her and dress her and help her to find appropriate clothing and stuff like that, because she didn't have clothing, helping with meal preparation, or inviting her for meals, and then gradually I included a whole range of uni students who said that they were interested in getting involved, to become friends and have continued to be friends. And

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so the network has grown and that's just one example of many young women that I've been involved with over many years, doing the same sort of thing.

Rachael Kohn: Ange and Dave Andrews are the founders of The Waiters' Union. It's a non-formal community network of people who live the gospel 24/7, located in West End, Brisbane. Dave Andrews has written *Christi-Anarchy: Discovering a Radical Spirituality of Compassion* with a foreword by Tim Costello.

SONG

I'll return to Ange and Dave Andrews a little later. In the meantime, here are some of the people from around Australia who came to Brisbane to learn from members of the Waiters' Union, and to experience the Sunday night service that Dave Andrews leads in the local Anglican church.

Dave Andrews: (preaching) Don't you reckon that's a great picture of God? A God who is a good listener, a gentle counsellor, a God who's a courageous campaigner for love and justice. Now that's a God I can relate to. And that's the kind of God that Jesus shows God to be. In fact as the Archbishop of Canterbury once said, 'God is Christlike, and in God is no un-Christlike thing at all. If you want to know what God is like, we need to look at Jesus Christ.

Yvonne: I'm Yvonne from West End.

Kate: I'm Kate from Melbourne.

Gillian: I'm Gillian from the Adelaide Hills.

Neil: And I'm Neil from Highgate Hill.

Rachael Kohn: I think it would be great to hear from each of you what sort of area you're working in. And what's brought you to this course?

Yvonne: I'm actually living in West End and I've been here for the last 20 years. I've grown up in the community in West End. I'm more involved with facilitating people in coming in to the area. and helping people feel at home and connected in an ongoing way, supporting Bristol Street, people who live at the Bristol Street community house, a group of young people who are coming to live and explore their faith, and they have cheap rent, which is about \$35 a week which subsidises them. Instead of working full-time they can work part-time, or study part-time, and explore living in community. So I have a big commitment to them, and I'm studying out there a bit at the moment in which I'd like to be able to use that more in the community.

Kate: I'm Kate, and I'm involved with Urban Seed, which is an inner-city faith-based mission organisation in Melbourne. I'm part of what we call a residential program there. There's four people who live in the building, have a presence there and are very involved with the work that Urban Seed does. That's primarily a couple of things. We run an open lunch every day out of the basement of the building, and that feeds around about 60 people who struggle with various issues like homelessness, unemployment, mental illness, various kinds of addiction.

Gillian: Hello, I'm Gillian and I live in the Adelaide Hills in South Australia, and I've been involved for the last eight years with marginalised people in that district, partly through people in the prison, and then when they come out, helping them get established, and also through the church that I belong to.

We have a free meal every Sunday night but we try and have as our prime concern, relationship building rather than just feeding, so we have a nice two-course meal and we try and serve people in a way that perhaps just you and I might get served by our Mum or somebody special. Many people have nobody who's special, who they are special to.

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And the other thing it's very associated with faith from my perspective in that am I understanding the questions that I've had over the years that many of the things that churches have been doing to so-called help people, haven't really worked, because the foundational problem is a lack of love and a lack of relationship. And so I guess one of the reasons I've come here is because from what I've heard from Dave and also from what I've read, many of the things in this community are being done that we would like to develop and pursue in Mount Barker or in the Hills in Adelaide.

Neil: Hi Rachael, I'm Neil, I live in the inner city of Brisbane, and my main work that I've involved in currently is in mental health community work. I'm involved in organising a small agency called A Place to Belong, which works Brisbane-wide, and we're seeking to respond to the belonging needs of people with mental health challenges.

We work with isolated people who ask us to get involved with them, to help them rebuild a sense of connectedness with others in their locality or in their neighbourhood, and I guess we're seeking to provide another option other than the biomedical model which is a lot of what our services are providing in mental health. We're saying that belonging and relationship and friendship and acceptance and respect are critically important in mental health. So that's one of the main areas I'm involved in in my community work.

Rachael Kohn: Churches have always been involved in community work, and charity work. In what way would you identify what's going on here as distinct, as unique, as something else that you're looking for?

Gillian: Well I think the important thing is that Christianity, I think churches are just realising that Christianity is a whole of life thing, it's not just a religious thing, and that our wholeness of human beings involves every part of our life, so it's as much of caring for your neighbour for example, as what it is having a soup kitchen in the back of your church once a week, and maybe even more so, because then you may not need the soup kitchen in the long run, if people do feel loved and cared for, and have a sense of belonging and a sense of self-respect and all of those sorts of things that human beings really need to be whole.

Rachael Kohn: Is it important for any of you in your work to convey the message of the gospels? Are you in any way committed to evangelising, or not?

Yvonne: What's more important to me is the spirit of who I am and what I share with other people, and that I'm not there to evangelise others or there with a big agenda. It's rather that they do feel the spirit that I have or that I feel with God. And that I am able to create a space that is safe and that is ongoing in order to help them feel that sense.

Kate: Sometimes the people who are perhaps the most marginalised or disadvantaged, are also the most evangelised. Every religious person with an agenda targets, often will target those sorts of people, and we find that a lot with people who come in to the lunch that we run. So I think I concur with Yvonne, that just being authentically who you are and seeking to meet people where they are, and following the example of Christ in that is often a lot more powerful than words.

Neil: My response to that question Rachael is really developed over the years. I guess I've been on a long journey of over 20, 30 years trying to work out what does my mission mean. What's the mandate that I'm seeking to respond to. And my journey I guess has been very much about I still have a mission, I still have a sense of mandate, I still have a sense of purpose in what I'm doing. But the transition for me over the years has been moving from having a very verbal involvement with people, a very theoretical involvement in terms of theorising about faith, about spirituality, or verbalising or talking about faith, and seeking to call people to a conceptual response to Christianity.

I've moved from that kind of polarity to a polarity more of I guess a deeper engagement with people around issues in my and their lives, a much more mutual involvement, still coming with a sense of mission and a sense of passion and a sense of compassion and still seeking to

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respond to the spirit of the Christ who I believe in, and still may be involving lots of verbal conversation, but I guess a far deeper engagement around the fundamental issues in people's lives.

And so working and seeking for change, not just in their lives, but in my life as well; not just in their thinking, but in my thinking as well. And working for change in live, not just in terms of theology or doctrine. So I think for me, the mission I'm engaged with is I guess much more about changing me as well as others, much more about a mutual engagement with people and much more around life issues rather than a simple detached kind of verbal conversation with you.

Rachael Kohn: Well you've just raised a wonderful point, and that is, how has your work affected you as Kate said, people who are marginalised are often evangelised and they are the focus always, but it is a two-way relationship. How important is the work that you do for you yourself, for your own spirituality?

Neil: Someone once said, Rachael, that what you see depends on where you stand, and what you hear depends on who you listen to. And I think that's very true of what we're trying to say in the course here. And what we're doing here is we're seeking to engage with people and live with people and learn with people, and that's a very personally changing thing as well.

It's a challenge for us, it's a challenge for me, and I know my view of salvation over the years has I guess deepened from bringing a message of salvation for others to more a perspective of I need saving too, I need help too. We need to work out what salvation means for us collectively, and in our societies we're coping with enormous fractures and enormous challenges and problems, and I'm part of the problem, and we need to search for the solution together as well.

So I find that a very personally challenging thing, so rather than coming from a comfortable position of telling others something, I'm coming with a sense of how can we work this out together. And yes, that's quite challenging for me.

Kate: It seems Neil, that you've just articulated perhaps a journey that I'm just beginning, but I have to say that in the last six months I've become more acutely aware of my own relational handicaps and weaknesses, and less than ever feel that I'm in a position to deliver some kind of top-down message or to go and help people.

Rachael Kohn: Can I ask you to give me an example of the kind of situation, or type of person that you find really difficult, that is really hard to relate to, that is hard to bring out the best in you?

Gillian: Yes, I've found definitely that it's crucial really for all of us that from a spiritual perspective it's very easy to be very plastic spiritually when we don't have to engage with people. But I've had many problems in my life, but mental health issues is not one of them, and when I've had a couple of friends, one in particular, that really struggled, then I found that many of the worst aspects of me came out, but at the same time, when I could really get to know my friend, there's a real respect. So even though I've had to deal with many issues, you start to see from the other side, the other perspective, and I think it's been good for both of us to do with that.

Rachael Kohn: In doing this really difficult work, do you have a mentor, do you look to somebody who gives you strength? Is it Christ, is it St Francis, is it someone you know?

Gillian: I certainly find that I have to keep very well connected to my God, to the Lord and to Jesus, otherwise I can't do it. But it's a very humbling thing also, because I'm increasingly aware of how little I can do myself in one way, and so when I both try and become more Christlike, but of course that's very difficult, but also look to Christ always for myself, then I find that I'm actually of more use to people, that's a better way of putting it, or I can connect with people more effectively when I do that.

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But when I first started this work, or I guess befriending some people like this, I became overwhelmed far too often and feeling as though it was all on my shoulders, that I had to be able to help people but I've pulled back from that completely and realising that it's just a journey, it's a life, it's living and connecting with people, and being in a relationship and loving and caring for people and all those sorts of things as well as the other way round as well.

Yvonne: My experience of my faith seems so far away from all you guys because I feel like my faith was founded in India, in a context of many religions, and I didn't grow up in a mainstream church, so reaching out to the other has mainly been from the poor reaching out to me, and giving me their last bit of milk when that's all they have, and being the most generous, and that's my role model. That's the impetus for my life, is to embody the characteristics of people who are suffering the most. Yes, I just feel like that's what I'm trying to move towards, is the unbelievable joy and generosity that people have when they're suffering, the total relishing you have when you only have a little.

Neil: It's a good question, Rachael, there's no doubt I've got many, many mentors. I think it's good to draw from many places, certainly for me, a central figure in terms of a spiritual mentor for me would be the work and the life and teaching of Jesus, and I still draw from that, including from the lives of people in the early church, and he wrote in the letters and in the New Testament about some of the radical struggles they were going through, and working out how they could live together and love each other and I draw from the kind of lessons that have been recorded there for us.

But I'm continually reading and spending time with different people who mentor me and help me in various ways, whether people I read about in books or local people, and as Vonny mentioned, people in our local community who are often devalued in our society, but who I think rather than being seen as problems can be real prophets for us, and so I draw from some local little prophets who by their resilience and the fact that they stay alive, day by day, I learn to admire their fortitude and bravery that some keep living through the kind of challenges that they encounter and live with continually, which are far greater and tougher than some of the challenges I face. So yes, I have many mentors.

Rachael Kohn: Well in all of this do you describe yourselves as Christian or as a Baptist, or as an Anglican, Uniting Church, how would you describe yourselves?

Yvonne: I would describe myself as a follower of Christ, and I have been impacted a lot by Catholicism, and Baptist and Evangelical, but I don't really understand what that all means, but I really feel like I've identified with Christ from a young age, and that's who I'm following.

Kate: Although I grew up in the Anglican church, I don't really understand enough, the differences between the denominations to know where I'd identify myself, but I've also drawn from different traditions in my reading and in my experiences.

Rachael Kohn: Would you say you're a Christian?

Kate: Yes, absolutely, in the sense that I'm a follower of Jesus and is there anything more on that?

Gillian: I didn't grow up in the church but I did come to faith I suppose as a Christian in my early 20s, and I'm now part of the Uniting Church in Mount Barker, not for any reason other than just that's where I happen to be, I believe in all the different denominations and organisations have much to contribute.

Neil: Yes my faith journey I've drawn from a range of places. I've drawn heavily from para-church organisations, youth work organisations, and the Anglican church where I'm worshipping at the moment in my local area. I define myself fundamentally as a follower of Christ.

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Rachael Kohn: Some of the mission workers who in various ways serve the homeless and the needy in their cities around Australia. I'm Rachael Kohn and this is the third in a three-part series about religious communities.

SONG: Kindness

Rachael Kohn: Religious communities come in different forms, but The Waiters' Union in Brisbane doesn't rely on monks, nuns, priests or bishops to do its work, helping those in need. Dave and Ange Andrews find their faith expressed in simpler terms, as in this song, sung by Dave.

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Dave Andrews: I think for me the challenge is to live hope in the midst of despair because I think given the current global realities where there's so much terrible violence and warfare and disregard for the rights of people and in our country such a disregard for refugees and indigenous people, the challenge is to try and find hope in the midst of despair because I think unless we find hope in the midst of despair, we can't sustain the struggle, we can't feel completely and utterly hopeless and continue to engage in change.

One of my disciplines is to every day make time to be open to the reality of God and God's love, to actually allow myself to be immersed in that love and to be renewed in that love, so that out of the overflow of that, I can engage with hope and compassion in a world where otherwise I'd feel quite hopeless about making any significant contribution at all, so for me at the heart of the process of all this kind of activity that we do in the neighbourhood is the secret, quite, private place of an exponential experience, of the love of God.

I believe that part of the universe is the heart of God, and the heart of God is the heart of love, and that unless I continually experience a renewed, an awareness of that, not just in terms of theological categories but in terms of my own personal experience, that I will not have the energy to continue to engage. I think it's very interesting that the word 'enthusiasm' comes from enthios, or 'being in God', and so both Annie, Ange and I try to find ways of experiencing something of the vitality, the energy, the enthusiasm that comes with that continued encounter with God.

Ange: I think as Dave was talking I thought of the refugees and they speak to me in a thousand ways about God, by their example, by their suffering, and by the dignified way in which they have addressed enormous hurdles that they have had to cope with, and become able to sort of get through, to be hopeful, they're having their dances, they're having their community gatherings, they're having their celebrations, they are actually encouraging each other towards a new future and to me that's inspiration, and they have come through the worst of it.

And I feel challenged by that all the time, and draws for me spiritual awakening that's ongoing and also that I do a lot of reading around a lot of themes especially to do with the spirit, what the name of your program is, which is The Spirit of Things, because to me, without all these things that maybe we might immerse ourselves in, are nothing without the spirit of it.

They have no meaning unless it comes from a really good place that's actually growing inside us, and growing inside other people, and it sort of awakens something in them too, you know. And in terms of my children, I also feel like I'm trying to live in a way that's meaningful to them on a daily basis that they can feel sense, understand and sort of gather some momentum for themselves about a vision for their lives and what they'd like to do.

Rachael Kohn: I gather it's pretty important for The Waiters' Union not to be out there and advertising itself, but working more behind the scenes. It's more the action and not promoting the Waiters' Union itself. Can you tell me how the Waiters' Union is organised and how many people are involved?

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Dave Andrews: I think the whole name Waiters, gives the idea of people in the background just being available, trying to help out and that's part of what we're on about.

I think what we want to do is be a catalyst for change, which means that you have a kind of secret influence that has some kind of effect but that's not prominent, it's not high profile, it's actually quite low profile, because a catalyst can affect something to the degree that it's mixed up in the situation in which it's located.

So the Waiters is actually a network of about 10, 15 households in this area of people who develop relationships with neighbours in general, but more disadvantaged neighbours in particular. And in the context of those relationships tries to join people around issues they're struggling with.

Often in that struggle, those people will actually form groups so a pay-the-rent group to actually pay the rent to traditional owners, or they'll form a group like the West End Refugee Support Group that Ange is involved with, or they'll join, developed groups to provide literacy and numeracy training for people that have intellectual disabilities in the hostels. The thing about every group that people in the Waiters start, is that that group is named, managed and organised by the people themselves, it doesn't bear the Waiter's name. The Waiters is just the name of the network.

Every activity in this community that we've generated is not run under our name because the whole idea is to be part of an empowering process rather than an overpowering one. It's meant to be in stark contrast to religious imperialism that tries to control people. It's the whole idea of coming alongside people, encouraging them, supporting them, helping them to develop groups and projects that actually serve their interests and their needs, and we collaborate in that process.

Rachael Kohn: How committed are the other members, the other houses? Is it a kind of formal commitment? How do you keep that going?

Dave Andrews: Well there are different ways at different communities actually keep commitments going. Traditionally in Australia intentional Christian communities have had very clear covenants, and everybody's had to make these commitments. The difficulty with that is that you actually exclude a lot of the people that we want to include.

We want to include people who cannot say that they're Christian, because they're not. Or even if they'd like to be, don't really understand what it's about, because of the intellectual or psychiatric disabilities, and so if we actually give those as requirements, we actually exclude those very people that we want to include. So we have no criteria.

We actually have no rules or regulations that people have to subscribe to, to become members of the Waiters' Union, people become a part of the network by participating in it. And so we'll discover the people in the Waiters' Union that we never knew were a part of it, but they think they're a part of it, and so they are a part of it, and that's great. That's what matters, and it's like Angie's saying, that she gets involved with people and then she invites other people to get involved alongside her and they get involved and they invite other people to get involved in this whole lot of energy and activity around it that's not centrally organised, and not centrally controlled, but it's kind of like this thing that's just kind of happening.

Ange Andrews: It's a fluid thing, and I know that so many times when I'm running something like a say for instance the sewing group –

Dave Andrews: This is the sewing group for refugee women.

Ange Andrews: - which has been going for 15 years now, with waves of refugees coming through there, and with really good volunteers that come from all over the place, the women say to me, the ones that are volunteering, they say sometimes, 'Angie what is the Waiters' Union?' And I said, Like I've never told you about the Waiters' Union because it's actually

The Waiters Union About Us

about all of us, the stuff we're actually doing in the community without a name, even though the name has a place. But they said, We feel a part of that, so how does that happen?

Well that's the whole point, like it's actually about generating an attitude, a certain kind of mentality within people over a period of time, participating in a whole range of different activities that actually draw those kinds of values out, that we're trying to promote within the Waiters.

Rachael Kohn: Dave and Ange in all of this I'm struggling to get an idea of who Christ is for you, and what living out his life means, because for a lot of people it's the church, but here we are in your house and you're talking about houses and you're talking about networks of people who are not necessarily Christian. So who is this Christ who inspires you?

Dave Andrews: I believe that Christ is God come among us to show us how to live much more authentic human lives, and Christ himself didn't come to start a new religion. He said, 'I am come to bring life, to enhance life', so I believe the way of Christ is a way of affirming all that is truly life-giving in all traditions and religions and cultures. And so what we try to do as a network, if I was to define who we are and how we operate, I'd say we're a network of people living in the locality, trying to develop a sense of community with all people, particularly the most marginalised, to reflect the love of Christ.

Now in that definition, it's really clear that though we are trying to live out a Christlike life, we're not a Christian community, and we're deliberately not a Christian community because we want to be a Christlike community, that transcends the Christian non-Christian divide.

To be truly committed to the way of Christ I believe means transcending your own religious preoccupations and prejudices to relate to all people in a Christlike way. I mean Christians often forget that when Jesus was trying to talk to people about true spirituality, he told the Jews about a heretic like the Good Samaritan, he was holding up an example of somebody that they would not have recognised as one of their own, as an example of the way that they were all to live and so we are trying to develop a way of life together that helps people develop the humility to learn from everybody how we can live a much more authentic human life.

Now we try to live that out in a way that we believe is truly spiritual, but we don't believe that the spiritual is necessarily religious. We believe that the spiritual is anything lived out that reflects the radical compassion of Christ regardless of the nature of the activity, whether it's religious or not, so it's the way Ange and I relate to each other, it's the way we relate to our kids, it's the way we relate to our neighbours, relate to strangers, it's the way we relate to our friends, but it's also the way we relate to our enemies. It's all about a spirituality that shapes our responses to the world around about us.

Rachael Kohn: And is that reflected in the Sunday evening service at St Andrews?

Dave Andrews: We believe that it's reflected in a whole range of ways. I mean we gather every Monday morning for prayer, and we find out information, issues happening in the neighbourhood and we try to respond to those, we have men's groups that get together and women's groups that get together to nurture that kind of spirit, but we also found that people would like to gather in a large group, and we've been able to talk with the people in St Andrew's Anglican church, about meeting in the basement there and so together, in collaboration with that local church, we've tried to develop a service there that's a place of welcome for some of the most marginalised people in our neighbourhood.

SONG: Jesus is on the Main Line

Rachael Kohn: The congregation really gets into the swing of it, with Dave Andrews on Sunday Night in the St Andrew's Anglican Church in West End, Brisbane.

The Waiters Union

About Us

Well I hope you enjoyed the Waiters' Union, the final in our series ,l>Monks, Nuns and Waiters, Full Time Faith, 24/7.

Production was by me and Geoff Wood and technical know-how was provided by Michelle Goldsworthy.

Next week, the return of Meister Eckhart. A mediaeval mystic makes a comeback with the founding of the Meister Eckhart Society in Australia. That's the Return of Meister Eckhart on The Spirit of Things, with me, Rachael Kohn.

SINGING

Further information:

Becoming the Church We Believe In

An essay by Dave Andrews outlining the ideas and outlook of The Waiters' Union. Published online as a presentation for the National Theological Consultation, 'The Church in the 21st Century'. <http://nat.uca.org.au/TD/evangandmiss/reports/presentationforntc.htm>

Monks, Nuns and Waiters: Fulltime Faith 24/7

A series looking at religious communities in Australia.
<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/stories/s1459355.htm>

Presenter: Rachael Kohn

Producer: Geoff Wood and Rachael Kohn