



A THUMBNAIL INTRODUCTION TO THE “FIGTREE AFFAIR”

And the case against the Dobbs Family

FIGTREE ANGLICAN CHURCH V THE DOBBS FAMILY

I have written a great deal about this case: A Cautionary Tale, A Mother’s Story, The Evolution of a Lie, Whispers and Lies and The First Stone Revisited are the major ones. Each looks at the case from a different angle. This article is to give the new readers (or just the bemused readers) a quick overview of the main facts and issues in the case, to assist them to understand how monstrous behaviour could have developed in a Christian church, how the use of lie from the University of Wollongong brought into the parish of Figtree Anglican church was used, and the whole Dobbs’ family abused, by people they had trusted.

Louise Greentree

**Figtree Anglican Church
In the case against the Dobbs Family.**

Figtree is a suburb of Wollongong NSW. After a consolidation of four churches in the district, Figtree Anglican Church (FAC) became one of the super-large parishes of Sydney Diocese during the 20-year incumbency of Rev. Rod Irvine. Its website used to boast 11 ordained and lay ministers and 4 administrative staff. Rod retired early in 2008 and moved back to Brisbane diocese with his wife Helen.

Scott and Machel Dobbs and their six children, aged at the time from 10 to 20, had attended Figtree for a total of 12 years when in 2007 they were all thrown out of the church. For their youngest daughter, it was the only church she had ever known. As the children had been home schooled in their primary years, for the youngest ones all their friends were at that church. The children were prohibited from attending any of the children’s and youth programs at FAC. You might well ask: why? What sort of people in a Christian church would behave like that towards such strongly Christian children and young adults? It is a strange story.

Scott Dobbs, like Socrates and like the prophets in the Bible, is a gadfly.

In 2005 when he found a soft-marking and attempted bribery for and among overseas students running in the university department where he and Helen Irvine the senior minister’s wife worked: he made it known that he would blow the whistle – and he ended up without a job, due to a totally fabricated ‘complaint’ from a student he had never known beyond her attendance in his seminars, among 16 or so other students in the second half of 1999. This student was allowed to make an ‘informal complaint’ by the director of the universities EEDU the day before Scott’s application for permanent employment was dealt with, and it bypassed the university’s Code of Conduct for such complaints so that, firstly, Scott never was told about its’ existence, let alone given a chance to defend himself; and, second, the terms of the complaint were never subjected to proper scrutiny – they would not have stood up to that.

In 2006 when the young people playing in the church bands wanted a spokesman to express their concerns about the music chosen by the parish staff leadership team Scott went and spoke up for them even though the church culture was one of unquestioning obedience to the leaders – and he was expelled from the meeting.

In late 2006 when Bruce Clarke the “executive minister” ignored the attempted rape of a 14-year girl and physical assault on her mother at a church function: Scott went to Bruce and strongly put the point that Bruce’s behaviour had been inadequate and unacceptable.

There is also evidence of open hostility by Rod and Helen Irvine, and Bruce Clarke towards this whole family prior to the events to which we now turn.

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Helen Irvine, the Senior minister's wife brought false gossip and fabricated complaints from the university to Figtree Anglican church.

False gossip appears to have been circulated in the parish to the effect that Scott had lost his job at Wollongong University for sexually abusing young women. This was not true: the one complaint, fabricated for the purpose of denying Scott his application for permanent employment, had no sexual element to it by any stretch of the imagination. Not only that, Helen Irvine was responsible for the spread of this lie, augmenting it, by going around the faculty to try to drum up more complaints to, at her worst, referring to some 4 students, although one of them, as Helen well knew did not complain of sexual abuse, but sexual discrimination in a complaint quickly withdrawn, and one was insistent on remaining anonymous.

By at least **mid-December 2006 (and almost certainly earlier than this)** this gossip had reached Lee Nicholls through the agency of Yvonne Gunning, Figtree's Children's Minister and child protection officer, who admits she heard it from Helen Irvine. Lee knew Yvonne Gunning because she had attended a day-seminar on child protection run by Yvonne, not once but five times within the year.

About Emma Nicholls.

Lee's daughter Emma had for six years been friendly with the Dobbs girls and frequented the Dobbs home.

This young woman Emma, a 20-year-old (in 2006) with mental and physical health problems was a “lame duck” that Scott's daughters had tried to help. At about this time they had got her to start coming to Figtree church with them. She had a crush on Scott which she was manifesting in unacceptable behaviour in later 2006. It was an understandable girlish crush. Scott is handsome and charismatic. It was a totally unrequited crush. Scott's wife Machel is a picture-book beauty, and they are totally devoted to each other and their family of beautiful Christian children.

Neither Lee Nicholls, nor Emma Nicholls were parishioners of Figtree Anglican Church. This is important because the removed the case from the parish's responsibility because Dr. Dobbs was not employed by or in any leadership position in the parish. He had not met Emma at the church; he met her when his daughters befriended her.

It is noteworthy that all the incidents rated as “sustained” by the diocesan Professional Standards Committee in May 2008 were alleged to have occurred from early December 2006 over a space of a mere 2 months to 28th January 2007, and ALL of them involved the 20-year-old Emma deliberately and with forethought pushing herself into positions where she could get Dr. Dobbs alone with her.

It is clear from her writings, and the comments of her medical practitioner Dr. Richard Schloeffel, that she had developed a delusion (consistent with her Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and other suspected mental issues) that, just as she had “fallen in love” with Dr. Dobbs, he had fallen in love with her, and all that was needed was for her to give him the chance to tell her so. Not only did he not do this, he fled from her presence when she barged in on him when he was alone in his study looking at his

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computer screen in the darkened room, stood up close, leaned over him to look at the computer screen also, and, she says, held one of his hands on her waist and patted his hair with the other.

Lee Nicholls and her complaint of behalf of her 20-year-old daughter.

On 1st February and 4th February 2007 Lee Nicholls had two ‘official’ interviews with Yvonne Gunning in her role as child protection officer for the parish which resulted in Lee and Yvonne together laying ecclesiastical charges against Scott Dobbs alleging offences against Emma. Emma declined to be a party to these charges. It took a three-hour conference with Yvonne Gunning to force her give a statement after Bruce Clarke had been told that, despite her refusal to make a complaint, she was needed if the case against Dr. Dobbs was to go ahead. It should be stated here that there was **no** allegation that Scott had sex with Emma nor that he even touched her in an indecent manner.

The assessment of the case by Phillip Gerber, director PSU as early as March 2007.

Diocesan Professional Standards Unit director Phillip Gerber wrote in April 2007 quoting from a letter he had already sent to the parish on 22nd March 2007:

*“It seems to me that what the church wardens, parish council, Bruce Clarke and Rod Irvine had was evidence that you have a particular understanding of boundaries ... which at best are capable of being misunderstood They did **not** (Gerber’s emphasis) have evidence that you are a deliberate, intentional or serial predator on young women or children” (Source: letter Philip Gerber to Scott Dobbs 11 April 2007.)*

This would appear to be the attitude of the Police and the Department of Community Services (as it was then named): in neither case were the complaints made to them by Bruce Clarke and Yvonne Gunning treated as worthy of action.

None-the-less, the parish insisted that Phillip Gerber continue with an investigation and laying charges against Dr. Dobbs under church law.

FAC clergy, staff and parishioners behaved like a cult towards the family. Shunning and banning is cult behaviour.

Within days of (if not even before) Lee Nicholls and Yvonne Gunning signing their complaint most of the parish - except for the Dobbs’s who were kept in the dark – had come to believe that Scott had been charged with “child sexual abuse”.

When the young teenage daughters went to their next leadership training class at Figtree they were thrown out – without explanation. When they next went to church people turned their backs on them. When they asked the ministers “what is this all about” the ministers, including Yvonne Gunning just kept saying “We can’t tell you anything”.

On 1st May 2007 Scott Dobbs was banned from coming to church at Figtree at all. The next day the rev. Bruce Clarke telephoned Mrs. Dobbs and her eldest daughter and told them both that the whole family was banned from coming to church. Details of how

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the church ministers systematically humiliated ostracised and tormented Scott’s wife and children can be read in the article “A Mother’s Story” on www.churchdispute.com Even teachers at the children’s Anglican school carried out the leadership orders to shun the Dobbs family when they met socially and when Machelles went to a parent/teacher meeting.

Machelles and her eldest son appealed for help to various diocesan authorities over an extended period while they were being publicly ostracised by the congregation on the orders of the clergy. Their appeals were rejected. The diocesan response was a video presentation played at church services in May 2008 in which a diocesan leader, Al Stewart, then the Bishop of Wollongong told the congregation that Scott had been found guilty by the Professional Standards Committee and he and the Anglican church Registrar Philip Selden publicly approved the shunning and banning of the whole family, from adults to children, from attending church.

In June 2008, their eldest son appealed to the Anglican Primate of Australia. In July and August 2008 formal complaints were lodged with the relevant church authorities alleging spiritual and emotional abuse, harassment and bullying of Machelles Dobbs and her children by certain clergy and church officials.

The charges under church law.

For a full description and dissection of the charges see “A Cautionary Tale” article on www.churchdispute.com

The charges were laid under church disciplinary measures enacted from about 2002 after the public outcry over church inaction concerning paedophile priests and lay ministers. The stated intent of these measures was to hold to account persons in positions of “power and trust” in the church.

Scott was only an ordinary church attender. He was not in any position of “power and trust” in the church.

Scott had decided to give an espresso machine to the church and give his time and expertise (and his own coffee & milk) to offer ‘good’ coffee after services because he (and others) preferred that to the church’s filtered coffee. According to the diocese that made him a “church worker” with a “coffee ministry” and on a par with a priest or lay minister! On this basis, they claimed the right to put him on trial before a church tribunal.

However, the terms of the Discipline Ordinance 2006 of Sydney diocese do not permit the church to act against the ordinary parishioner but only against people who are defined as church workers in the Ordinance. If not clergy, then the person needs to have been appointed or elected to one of a variety of church ‘positions’ that are set out in the Ordinance, and they must be positions of leadership. Dr. Dobbs had not been appointed to any of these positions and he had always maintained that that was the case.

Eventually in statutory declarations they were forced to prepare for the Tribunal hearing neither the Rev. Rod Irvine nor the Rev. Bruce Clarke (as his delegate) could produce any evidence of an appointment or election of Scott to any of these positions.

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So right from the start the parish and diocesan personnel acted unlawfully as regards church law.

What happened at the Tribunal.

The diocesan Disciplinary Tribunal hearing of the allegations against Scott was originally listed on 6th November 6, 2008. Painful as these hearings would be, Scott said a public hearing of the evidence was the only way he would be shown to be innocent, and his good name restored.

When the Tribunal hearing finally commenced in June 2009, the Director PSU, his lawyer and the diocesan Registrar all participated in a concerted effort to force Dr. Dobbs to agree to a withdrawal of the charges by the diocese. This he finally agreed to on the basis that the (now former) Bishop of Wollongong Al Stewart would make a video correcting the previous video he had made, and that a letter (the terms of which were settled by the Chair of the Tribunal) would be read out at each service at Figtree Anglican Church one Sunday.

Has this agreement been honoured? Of course not.

To date Bishop Al Stewart and the present senior minister of Figtree the Rev. Ian Barnett have refused to do this.

The Rev. Ian Barnett has also refused to retract the ‘ban’ on the whole family going back to attend services at Figtree Anglican Church when asked to do so, even though there is clearly no reason whatever as a matter of justice and good Christian behaviour to refuse them. The Christian concepts of repentance and apology seem to have passed these learned gentlemen by.

What is needed to heal the harm done by these people to an innocent family.

Even if this is done nothing short of demonstrations of repentance by those who have dealt so mercilessly with this family can repair the emotional, psychological and spiritual harm done by Figtree Anglican Church and personnel of Sydney diocese to Dr. Dobbs, his wife and his six children.

And we must not forget Emma Nicholls who has also suffered greatly at the hands of those who so ruthlessly dealt with her poor simple delusional search for love.