

MICHAEL SEIGEL 1947-2019

Rob Youl, Australian Landcare International, with the Seigel family

Michael Seigel was born in Wonthaggi, Victoria, where his father, a shearer and Tobruk Rat, worked as a PMG linesman. The family moved to Barooga, NSW, opposite Cobram, Victoria, eventually numbering five: two girls, three boys. His father's wartime experiences resurfaced daily. Returning to shearing and in demand locally, he was wracked by alcoholism. Michael's loving mother kept the family going, but the duress he experienced forged his vocation.

Accordingly, in his early teens he began training for the priesthood, moving to Lavington. With others of similar youth, he lived in a Society of the Divine Word (SVD) Minor Seminary run by a disciplinarian cleric, cycling daily to the local Catholic secondary school.

After two novitiate years in Queensland, he completed six years philosophical and theological studies in the US. When he decided to be ordained in Australia in 1972, Barooga's citizens wanted the ceremony in their town, rather than Wagga Wagga's cathedral. A local businessman offered his vast grain-shed, meticulously cleaned up, and the ordination proceeded to everyone's satisfaction and pride.

Around then, realising he was his father's son, he joined AA for life. Assigned to Japan in 1975, he embraced the language and culture, working in Tokyo parishes, making many friends and staunchly supporting AA Japan, which formed that year, fostering a group at Kichijoji. Michael took great pride in his recently published book in Japanese on addiction.

Michael started part-time lecturing at Nanzan University, Nagoya, later completing a doctorate at Birmingham University. Returning to Nagoya parish, he also guided SVD's Asia-Pacific Justice, Peace and Integration of Creation (JPIC) program, leading to a Rome posting from 1995-2000 as its Generalate co-ordinator.

Returning to Nanzan University, he lectured in social ethics, catholic missiology, peace and environmental studies and conflict resolution/reconciliation. Thankfully, his emeritus status on retirement meant he continued the work he loved: conferences, research, publishing, lecturing throughout Japan, with occasional Nagoya Sunday services. He retained close ties with Australian academics Prof John Pullen of New England University, Dr Aran Martin of Melbourne University and Prof Joseph Camilleri of La Trobe University Centre for Dialogue. Nanzan and La Trobe Universities in particular developed a rich program of seminars and publications directed to just and ecologically sustainable peace within and between nations.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, on leave in the Riverina, he noticed and appreciated how Landcare's advent had encouraged very effective community action on salinity westwards from Barooga to Deniliquin.

In industrial and post-industrial Japan, many rural communities were dying. The post-war generation had largely migrated, leaving their elders to continue traditional smallholder farming. Empty, disintegrating farmhouses proliferated;

numerous black, weedy squares across verdant checkerboards of rice, vegetable and fruit crops indicated family plots more or less uncultivated since the exodus to cities started sixty years ago.

Although some retirees returned home to farm again, many traditional skills had disappeared and few urban young people were moving back. Moreover, unpopular national-level programs planting Japanese cedar in former hardwood forests were altering the look and feel of landscapes. Mick thought Landcare's egalitarian philosophy, adapted from Australian experiences, might rejuvenate the Japanese countryside and help communities recover after natural disasters. He formed Secretariat to Promote the Establishment of Landcare in Japan (SPELJ), with Nanzan colleague, Dr Kazuki Kagohashi, and had many Landcare collaborators in Aichi Prefecture, which surrounds Nagoya.

Mick considered Landcare an outstanding government-community partnership. From 2008-13, minibus-driver Mick led six tours of rural NSW and Victoria for his Nanzan public policy classes. Impressively, students came from South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and China, besides Japan. One obligatory stop: Cowra's Japanese Garden, commemorating the mass escape by Japanese PoWs in August 1944.

Mick linked with Australian entities, including Australian Landcare International, facilitating student exchanges, one at PhD level, and other tours directed at rural environmental action and volunteerism. He also organised a visit by Luzon farmers connected with SVD to Mindanao, another Landcare epicentre, and helped young Japanese, Masahiro Kurauchi start his own student environmental and cultural tours.

In 2016, with four Australians, Mick and Nanzan Institute for Social Ethics colleagues committed to hosting an international Landcare academic conference in Nagoya in November 2017. Helped by the Australia-Japan Foundation and World Business Council for Sustainable Development, this very successful event, a global first, drew some 65 participants from eleven countries.

Post-conference, he led three more Landcare tours to NSW and Victoria, looking also at youth participation and connection to nature through Intrepid Landcare and Megan Rowlatt in the Illawarra.

Before the conference, a major operation treating oesophageal cancer had seemed highly successful. Last November Mick competed in the Massive Murray River Paddle, as he had done years before in 1972. He teamed with Dr Elena Tokimoto Ricciulli, Japanese-Italian daughter of one of his Tokyo parishioner-friends; they did well, covering over 100 kilometres.

Sadly, the cancer recurred soon after and Mick died early on 4 July 2019. His legacies: devotion to the Catholic church; intellectual contributions to the causes of peace and decency; a remarkable and useful Australian presence in Japan, for which he had such a deep affinity; a lifelong love of his family; many friends inside and outside his religion; and his broadening influence on Australian Landcare at home and overseas.