

SAFE WORK AUSTRALIA and the Christian Connection

Another in the series of “and the Christian Connection.”

Bob Mellows

A smouldering fire in a timber pumphouse deep underground led to one of the greatest mine disasters in Australian history. It also led to one of the greatest rescues—a triumph of human determination and cooperation.

Just over a century ago, on 12 October 1912, the day's shift of copper miners headed deep into the bowels of Mt Lyell in Tasmania. Forty-two of the men would never make it topside again.

When the fire started, nearly a hundred workers were trapped below it. Unable to find a passage to the surface, they urgently needed breathing equipment to have any hope of surviving. And the nearest suitable gear was in the gold-mining towns of Bendigo and Ballarat on the far side of Bass Strait. Breaking all existing shipping and railway-speed records, the breathing apparatus reached Tasmania's West Coast in time to save over fifty miners who were finally brought to the surface four days later.

Many people across Australia who'd prayed for the men were grieved at the tragic losses. A Royal Commission was ordered into the safety practices at the mine.

Eighty years later, a mine manager on the other side of Tasmania came to the conclusion that Royal Commissions are not the answer to workplace health and safety. The law of the land is no match for the law of love.

Bob Mellows, manager at the Cornwall coal mine in the Fingal Valley from 1991, convinced both his employers and his subordinates their dangerous workplace could be vastly safer—providing they treated each other differently. He looked to the teaching of Jesus: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.* (Luke 6:31)

Exploring Jesus' teachings on love, Bob Mellows shared his understanding of Scripture with the mine-workers. In 1998, he said, 'It is not because of legalism that Jesus Christ told us to love God and love one another. It was because he knew it was essential to our well being in all aspects of life.' He went on to say, 'The Foundation of Safety is loving one another (and ourselves).'

In the decade between 1980 and 1990, about 200 accidents a year had been reported at the Cornwall Mine. Management had annually made steep compensation payouts throughout that time. But when Bob Mellows' Scripture-inspired values were taken on board, the accident rate plummeted. By 1993, it was almost zero. It has remained there for well over a decade.

Stephen Baxter, another Tassie Christian, had this to say: 'Here we see a clear picture of how the values of Jesus work in the real world and a result when one person takes Jesus seriously and becomes salt and light in the community.'

Occupational health and safety is a deep concern of many employers—partly because of laws surrounding workplace safety. Partly too because accidents are costly to companies, both in terms of insurance upped, time lost, equipment damaged and workers hurt.

Bob Mellows was able to bring an entirely new perspective to this issue when he pointed out Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth, knew about physical toil and manual labour. And He never suggested governments could legislate that we care about each other in the workplace—or anywhere else for that matter. Only His law of love can change our hearts to make that a reality.

Do you possess that law of love? It is available through a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Written by Annie Hamilton

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Photo of Bob Mellows:

<http://www.examiner.com.au/story/518532/the-quest-for-coal-in-the-fingal-valley/>

Research Paper: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1275&context=coal>