

Inspiring Australian Saints // Sir Doug & Lady Gladys Nicholls

Introduction

During our Inspiring Australian Saints series we are looking at the lives of Australian Christians, ordinary people like you and me who lived extraordinary lives. Today, we are going to learn about Sir Doug Nicholls, whom The Age newspaper once described as Australia's Ghandi. Our chapel is named in honour of this man.

Doug was the sixth child of Herbert and Florence Nicholls and was born at the Cummeragunja Aboriginal Mission, on December 9, 1906.

As an eight-year-old, he watched his 16-year-old sister forcibly removed from the family. This was his introduction to the Stolen Generations and probably sowed the seed of his activism later in life.

At Cummeragunja, Doug was only permitted a Grade 3 education, so for work he collected tiger and brown snakes for sideshow organisers, who would pay him 1 shilling (or 10 cents) per snake.

Doug left the mission at 13 and couldn't read or write until he was around 21-year old.

In 1927, Doug hitchhiked to Melbourne from the bush and was living rough in the city, sleeping in fruit boxes at Queen Vic Market. However, he managed to talk his way into training with the Carlton Football Club. But he was released by Carlton when other players said they didn't want him on the team and the trainers refused to rub him down because he was Indigenous.

He subsequently joined Northcote in the VFA and to earn money in the off-season, he fought with Jimmy Sharman's Boxing Troupe and also sprinted professionally.

In 1933, he was picked up by the Fitzroy Football Club, and was the only Aboriginal player in the VFL at the time. He was third in the 1934 Brownlow Medal count and the following year became the first Indigenous person to represent Victoria.

Doug was not just a great sportsman he was also an ardent Christian and a member at Northcote Church of Christ. When his football career came to an end, he became an ordained Church of Christ Minister.

In 1943, he became the foundation pastor of the first Aboriginal Church of Christ in Australia by planting the Fitzroy Church of Christ Aborigines' Mission. As well as being a traditional church, the mission also became a place of welcome for Aboriginal people, providing assistance to those who were homeless or in need of help.

Doug was sent to fight in WW2. But whilst he was away Fitzroy Police along with the local Aboriginal community petitioned the Army to allow Pastor Doug to be recalled home to mediate in the racial tensions that were developing in the area.

Pastor Doug Nicholls increasingly became a political and social activist. In a well-known talk, he said, "The skeleton in the cupboard of Australia's national life is its treatment of the Aborigines. We have not had a fair deal. It was bad enough for us to lose our country, but it is one of the saddest stories of modern times that we should have become outcasts in our own land, with not even the rights and privileges that are extended to many aliens. We appeal for the right of education, for at least some of the rights of citizenship, for the chance to become useful citizens in the land that was ours by birth."

Doug helped set up the Aboriginal Advancement League, a forerunner of ATSIC, and was one of the first campaigners for land rights and for citizenship, which was finally recognised in the 1967 referendum.

Popular with both white and indigenous communities, he was named Victorian Father of the Year in 1962 and the King of Moomba in 1973. In 1972, he became the first Aboriginal person to be knighted and in 1976 was appointed governor of South Australia. In 1991, the Canberra suburb of Nicholls was named after him. And this year (2016) the AFL introduced the Sir Doug Nicholls Indigenous Round.

Arguably one of the most important Australians of the 20th century, Sir Douglas Nicholls' has a string of significant accomplishments in sport, activism and the church.

What is interesting about the word saint is that in Scripture it is used 67 times in the plural form “saints”. For example:

Romans 1:7

To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be **saints**:

Romans 8:27

...the Spirit intercedes for the **saints** according to the will of God.

2 Corinthians 13:12

Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the **saints** greet you.

There is only one instance of the word 'saint' appearing in the singular form. And even this has a plurality of saints in mind.

Philippians 4:21

Greet every **saint** in Christ Jesus.

What we glean from this principle of Scripture is that a saint is best a saint when he or she partners together with the "saints". And for that reason what I'd like to highlight today about sainthood as seen through the lens of Sir Doug Nicholls' life, is that saints do not work alone but it's always the saints together in partnership. And Sir Doug's primary partner in life and ministry was his wife Gladys.

The third of six children, Gladys like her husband was also born on the Cummeragunja Mission in 1906. Gladys attended school at the Mission, but left at a young age to work with her father and later took a job milking cows at a nearby station.

At the age of 19, Gladys married Doug's brother Herbert, with whom she had three children. The couple lived at Cummeragunja until 1939, when they joined a mass walk-out in protest against the harsh conditions and poor

treatment experienced by residents of the Mission.

Tragically, Gladys lost her husband in a car crash in 1942. And it was Herbert's younger brother, Pastor Doug who provided support to the family during their time of grief. Gladys and Doug were later married, and began their ministry together.

Gladys taught Sunday school at the Gore Street church where Doug pastored. As he rose to prominence, Gladys provided invaluable support as the bedrock of the family. They had two children, who grew up to have significant roles in Aboriginal affairs.

After World War 2, Gladys was among a small group of Aboriginal women who worked together to improve the living conditions and wellbeing of their community. Countless lives benefitted as a result of their tireless, unpaid work. In the absence of government support, they organised annual balls or sold homemade goods at weekly street stalls to raise funds. Utilising her business skills, Gladys also opened a number of successful op shops around Fitzroy to help raise much-needed money.

Gladys provided care and protection to many young people, in addition to her own children. With her house often filled to capacity, she recognized the need for a safe place for Aboriginal girls to stay when they came to Melbourne in search of work. A committee was established and, as a result of its efforts, a hostel was opened in Northcote in 1956. Gladys involved herself in the day-to-day running of the facility, which was later renamed the Lady Gladys Nicholls Hostel.

When Doug established the Aborigines Advancement League, Gladys co-founded its Women's Auxiliary and travelled around the state to recruit members. The Auxiliary's contribution ranged from the provision of school supplies to hospital visits and support for ex-prisoners.

Gladys advocated raising the status of Indigenous Australians in wider society and was involved with several national bodies. She campaigned with her husband in the lead up to the 1967 referendum, which will celebrate its 50th anniversary next year.

During the 1970s, when her husband was knighted and later appointed Governor of South Australia, Lady Gladys performed her official duties with great skill and dignity. In 2008, she was inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women.

Lady Gladys passed away in 1981 and was buried at Cummera gunja. Her husband was laid to rest beside her in 1988. A statue of the couple stands in Parliament Gardens in Melbourne in honour of their work together.

Conclusion

Much of Sir Douglas Nicholls' success is owed to his relationship with his wife Gladys. Saints like Sir Doug learn to work alongside others and understand the value of team.

Wildlife scientists have conducted extensive studies to determine why geese fly in a distinctive v-formation. They found some fascinating results from which we can glean important principles regarding the value of community and team.

1. By flying together in a v-formation, scientists estimate that the flock can fly about 70% further with the same amount of energy than if each goose flew alone. Geese have discovered that they reach their destination quicker and expend less energy when they fly together. Saints recognize that to fulfill their destiny, to reach where they are going they need to be surrounded by other saints.

2. Geese rotate responsibility. The goose flying at the front of the v formation expends the most energy because it faces the greatest wind resistance. When the lead goose gets tired, it drops out of the front position and moves to the rear of the formation to rest, whilst another goose moves to the front. This rotation happens many times during the course of a long journey. Likewise, saints learn to shoulder responsibility, as well as to take times of rest and to give space for others to play their part.

3. Geese honk at each other as they fly together.

Scientists speculate that this honking is the geese's way of communicating encouragement to one another. Saints understand the importance of encouraging other saints.

4. Geese help each other. Scientists also discovered that when one goose becomes ill or injured, and drops out of the formation, two other geese would remain with the weak goose. They will stay with and protect the injured goose until it is able to fly again or dies. Likewise, saints care for the well being of other saints.

1 Corinthians 1:2

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be **saints, together** with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

The life of Sir Doug & Lady Gladys Nicholls is inspirational. They achieved much during their lifetime and they did so because they recognized it is always the saints together – it is “saints” not “saint”.