REV. FRANK HARTLEY

Australian novelist Judah Waten tells the story of the Rev. Frank Hartley, the Melbourne Methodist clergyman who is one of the world's foremost workers for peace.

IN THE MELBOURNE SUBURB of Prahran, in the heart of the Chapel Street shopping centre, wedged in between delicatessens and frock shops is the building which houses the Prahran Methodist Mission with its cafe, rest room and child-minding creche established to meet some of the needs of the underprivileged people of the district. For the last 13 years Rev. Frank Hartley has been the superintendent of this Mission which has grown to such an extent that it has now under its control and administration a 75 acre farm for boys, flats for elderly citizens who pay only one-fifth of their pension in rent, a meals-on-wheels scheme for aged unable to leave their homes, and many other social services.

Frank Hartley is personally involved in all the activities of the Mission. He is not only the superintendent, but he takes a full part in all its work, even cultivating vegetable plots on the farm, picking plums for jam and chopping wood to keep pensioners in free firewood during the winter. Every week he sees dozens of needy people, pensioners, deserted wives, boys convicted by the courts and for all of them he tries to do something. He is tireless; there would seem to be not enough hours in the day for him.

Yet all the time his mind is on the struggle for peace, the urgent need to bring the war to an end in Vietnam lest it should escalate into a far bigger conflagration engulfing mankind. He is thinking of new and wider peace activities in which, as always, he will take a personal part, even handing out leaflets and carrying posters in a street parade.

Rev. Frank Hartley is without doubt one of the foremost peace workers of the post-war epoch, his fame extending to most countries of the world, as testified by the Joliot-Curie gold medal for Peace which was awarded to him by the World Council for Peace in December, 1965.
At Frank Hartley’s home in a suburban house in Malvern, in the lounge, on the walls of which hang his own water colors of Shaggy Ridge painted during the war in New Guinea, he spoke to me about himself, his past and present activities. He quickly revealed himself to be not only a dedicated worker for important causes, but also a homely man, essentially plebian and compassionate, concerned with individual human beings. He is the very opposite of the stereotyped stuffy clergyman of literature; his language is racy and he has an almost boyish sense of humor. There is a sincerity, an innocence about him that evokes an instant response. I did not wonder that standing as an independent for the Prahran Municipal Council last year, without any strong local organisation behind him, he came within two votes of being elected a councillor for a district which has long been represented by conservative-minded businessmen, topping the poll in the first count at every booth.

Frank Hartley is middle-aged, short and stocky, his hair is thinning and he wears glasses. Although he suffered a heart attack some years ago — he gives an account of his restoration to health in a Soviet hospital in his booklet, *Quest for Health*— he has not lost his youthful gay, confident expression and his eyes are unclouded.

He was born in Rutherglen, Victoria, in 1909. When he was an infant his parents settled in Wonthaggi, where he grew up. His father was a tailor by trade, but drove a winch when the first shaft was put down in the Wonthaggi coalfield and later returned to tailoring. Frank went to state school in Wonthaggi and then to technical school where he learned to paint. He has retained his love of painting to this day and in fact his booklet about his stay in a Soviet hospital is illustrated by his own water colors. While still at school he worked at night with his father as a presser and when he finished school his father set him up as a mercer in a shop next to the tailor’s shop.
In those Wonthaggi days he often talked with the miners’ leader, the late Idris Williams, a brave, cheerful communist who had lost a leg in France in the First World War. He had migrated from Wales and had quickly become deeply involved in the miners’ struggles and in the social life of Wonthaggi. Like a true Welshman, he regularly led community singing and sang in the Methodist choir on Sunday. He was later to become the national president of the Miners’ Federation.

Frank Hartley made his decision to enter the Church determined to help humanity and prepared to make sacrifices in this cause. He had lived 20 years in Wonthaggi when he went to the Otira Mission College to train for the Methodist ministry. Some time later he went to Queen’s College, Melbourne University, from which he graduated Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Divinity.

In 1939 at Easter he married his wife, Marion, who was also to become famous for her work for peace. She was born in Glasgow of devout, working-class parents who came to Australia in 1912. At the age of 20 she had gone to India as a missioner, thinking that India was indeed ‘a bright jewel in the crown of the Empire’, believing in all the conventional tales about British Imperialism’s ‘civilising role among the heathens’. But she saw the terrible poverty of the Indian people, and she saw the British military and police in action against the Indian National movement led by Gandhī. She returned to Australia with new ideas, with a sympathy for the Indian people struggling to free themselves from colonial bondage.

Six months after she and Frank married, the Second World War broke out and Frank Hartley was among the first group of chaplains to join the Australian forces. He went to the Middle East and joined the Second 7th Australian Division Cavalry Regiment in Palestine, and after Pearl Harbor sailed for Sumatra but, with the fall of Singapore was diverted to Ceylon. Still with the same Division he went to New Guinea in 1942. He described that experience in his book, Sanananda Interlude, which he dedicated to the men who fell on the Sanananda road: “To those who in their death taught me the meaning of life”.

From the age of 16 he became absorbed in the Methodist Church to which his parents devotedly adhered. “The issue before me was whether to become hard-hearted and go for success which meant wealth, or to follow a life of hardship but service for humanity. This struggle went on inside me for six months”.

This was at the time when the coal miners in Wonthaggi were fighting for fundamental trade union rights and for a living wage and there were frequent strikes lasting as long as six weeks. “I
was very moved by the capacity of the miners and their wives to make sacrifices for what they believed in, by their suffering in the cause of a principle and I recalled this during the war in New Guinea when we were cut off and did not expect to get out”.

That road earned the name of ‘The Track of Dead Men’s Bones’.

“The horror and reality of war burnt itself into my brain,” Frank Hartley wrote in Sanananda Interlude. During the Christmas of 1942 on that terrible track he and several others dedicated themselves to work for peace if they survived, which was certainly a matter of doubt then. For out of the 420 men he was with, only 47 walked out, the rest being dead or wounded. Frank Hartley was mentioned in despatches for his service in that battle, and Captain A. H. McCulloch wrote that his “selfless devotion to duty made him a hero in the eyes of the troops in New Guinea”.

True to his vow, as soon as the war ended, his quest for peace began. It was during a deputation in 1949 to the Lord Mayor of Melbourne, protesting against the denial of the hall for a democratic citizens’ meeting that he met Rev. Alf Dickie and together with him and several other clergymen took part in the formation of the Victorian Peace Council. At different times he has held the offices of president and secretary and in November, 1950, he was elected a member of the World Peace Council. In 1951 he went abroad for the first time to attend the second meeting of the World Council of Peace in Vienna. There he was invited by the Soviet Peace Committee to visit the Soviet Union. On that visit he preached three times in the Baptist Church in Moscow.

In that same year, in 1951, he became President of the Democratic Rights Council and he took a prominent part in the Referendum campaign that defeated Menzies’ attempt to suppress the Communist Party. He was convinced that this proposed measure would hinder the struggle for peace and he personally took a letter to Canberra to give to Prime Minister Menzies.

Later when the Australian and New Zealand Congress for International Co-operation and Disarmament was formed he became one of its executive officers. His prestige had grown enormously, not least in the churches all over Australia. When he left for the extraordinary meeting of the World Peace Council in Stockholm he had with him a letter from the President of his own Church introducing him to church leaders all over the world.

Throughout Europe he met with many church leaders and he noted the great changes that had come about in the climate of opinion in the churches, an increased readiness to co-operate with communists and all men of goodwill, regardless of religious and
political opinions, in an effort to prevent the outbreak of a new world war.

He is one of those clergymen who have been responsible for this change; today his belief in the desirability of co-operation with communists, non-believers and people of all religious denominations finds its confirmation in Pope John's famous encyclical, which he regards as a revolutionary document, and in the views of such Anglican thinkers as the Bishop of Woolwich.

For more than 14 years he had preached this doctrine on the Yarra Bank as well as in his church. Moves were made in the church to muzzle him and he once offered to resign but the Methodist Conference supported him, only three delegates voting against him. More than once he has met attempts to silence him, but he has resolutely fought for his beliefs and in the end has won through. To Frank Hartley, the Churches, in being prepared to work with the people's movements of the day in solving social questions and maintaining peace, are being true to the actual teachings of Christ and are assuring the future of Christianity. "In the modern world if the Church relies on institutions and dogma it will die", he said.

When we had finished our talk I had afternoon tea with Frank and Marion, and met two of their children. They have three sons and one daughter. Their youngest son, Wesley, is in the church in Western Australia and Frank told proudly of how he had recently founded a peace group in Perth.

Frank Hartley is filled with confidence in the youth. Mankind will ultimately banish all wars and bloodshed; the youth will have made a substantial contribution towards that great end.

In the words of the poet C. Day Lewis, for Frank Hartley "... there is no dismay
Though ills enough impend ... ."

Letters and contributions are welcome and should be sent to Box A247, Sydney South Post Office.

To meet printing schedules, copy must be in the hands of the editors one month before date of issue (the first day of every second month). Small items, and in special circumstances articles, may be accepted up to twenty days before publication date.

Articles and letters represent the views of the authors, not necessarily those of ALR, unless otherwise stated.