

A 15 636 kilometres walk around the world for the unity of Christians

An autobiographical account by Samuel Clear



For Mum

...who stopped reading my weekly updates when the journey became too dangerous, resorting to asking family members, "Is he okay?" Thank you for never calling me home despite the dangers.



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Foreword

What does seeking the unity of the Christian Churches have to do with being Christian?

A fair question.

But perhaps an even fairer one is to ask, can we truly be Christian and not desire to work for the unity of the Churches? Can the Church proclaim God's call for unity and love among *all* peoples if she herself is not united?

Assuming that seeking such unity is, in fact, a necessary part of our being Christian, what would that unity look like? How would we know whether we are contributing towards its coming into being? Conversely, how would we know whether we might be delaying its coming into being?

These are some of the questions that Sam's account of his walk for unity—the *walk4one*—raises and explores. Does Sam answer them? Yes, he does ... in part. Even though he went to extraordinary lengths physically, mentally and spiritually in walking the world to spread the message of the need to promote Christian unity through prayer, dialogue, and shared work for the common good, it was—and remains—not just a task for one man alone.

It is for *all* Christians to share in. And it is in fact more than 'our task'. Strange as it may seem, Christian unity is really a *gift*—God's gift. Our work towards unity among the Christian Churches (and, ultimately, all people) is not to make it come about by our own efforts. Rather, it is to prepare our hearts and minds to receive unity as a gift from God, a grace, when and how God wills to give it—which is to say: when we are ready and able to receive it.

Just as we need to change our hearts and minds about God—that God really is merciful; that God really does forgive and heal us of our sins; that we do not need to earn God's love; indeed, that God loves us *unconditionally*—so too do we need to think rightly about God's desire for us to ... be ... one.

The night before Jesus died he prayed that 'they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.' (John 17:21) Do we doubt that God desires Christians—indeed, all people—to be one in Christ? Or do we want to control something that should be a gift, a gift that is to be received gratefully and with joy?

I first learned of Sam's *walk4one* mission in January 2007, when I met Mary—Sam's mother—for the first time in Tasmania. I was struck by a few things. What an extraordinary undertaking Sam's walk was: it was a bold statement of faith in God's providence, and of belief in the truth of the call to Christian unity. But I was also struck by Mary's outlook. She also had to trust in God's providence, that God would accompany and go ahead of her son to assist him and bring him home safely in due course. Indeed, before Sam subsequently started sending weekly blogs, Mary said that she didn't want to know all the details of Sam's (mis)adventures when he wrote about them to his family and friends. Instead, she simply wanted to know each time that anyone heard from him whether he was okay. Just as well, really! Because there were times any mother would have gone out of her mind if she knew what was happening to her son…

A couple of weeks after meeting Mary I read a media report on Sam's progress and, later again, I started to read his blogs. They were engaging and inspiring, with a mixture of humour and pathos, adventure and reflection; and included some stunning photography—soulful portraits and breathtaking landscapes.

Later again, by the end of 2007, I thought that Sam's story should be recorded in a more permanent form a book. People in years to come should be able to access Sam's *walk4one* story and be inspired to pray, dialogue and work for unity as a result of reading it and entering into its call to action and its hope.

So I emailed Sam. He liked the idea. In fact, he was so keen on it that he wanted to start work on the book straightaway and to have it published in time for his return to Australia and appearance at World Youth Day in Sydney in July 2008!

However, I suggested to Sam that he concentrate on the walk and the prayer and all its demands: its delights and surprises. The book could—and should—come later, after he had time to reflect and to decide which parts of the story would be best to include in a book. And that's what he did ... and did exceptionally well. In the end, the book took longer than the walk!

Sam's *walk4one* includes adventures and misadventures, events that are heartwarming and some heartbreaking, and each episode provides some really captivating reading. I won't preview the things that Sam has to say; I don't want to steal his thunder! Instead let me conclude with two quotes about the search for Christian unity. The first is from the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism (1964):

The sacred mystery of the unity of the Church [lies] in Christ and through Christ, the Holy Spirit energizing its various functions. It is a mystery that finds its highest exemplar and source in the unity of the Persons of the Trinity: the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit, one God.

The Church's unity is not to be found in a uniformity of our own devising, but in harmonious, life-receiving

and life-giving diversity. And the second is from the Unity Statement of the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (2013):

The unity of the Church, the unity of the human community and the unity of the whole creation belong together. They are inseparable.

> Christopher Brennan Emmaus monastic community, Tasmania



Foreword



The Walk

Prologue	Australia Three years earlier: Melbourne, 2005	11 12
Part 1	South America	17
	Airports, Taxis & Prostitutes	18
	Missions, Bus Drivers & that 47°C	21
	Christmas Cheer, a Funeral Fiasco & Cow Candy	31
	Food Poisoning, a Game Show Chemist & the Darkest Nights	39
	The Broken Body, a Midnight Puma & the Barrel of a Gun	52
	Stonings, Rats & the Witness of Unity	76
	Colombian Assault, Glued Lips & Fireflies	91
•		
Part 2	Central and North America	101
	Surgery, a Drug-Induced Haze & a Pink Dinosaur	102
	Scorpions, Highway Knives & a Thunderstorm Pursuit	109
	Swindlers, Stalkers & Salmonella	129
	Refugees, Earthquakes & the Kiss	144
	A Racing Heart, a Dislodged Hip & Border Security	159
	Bolting Snakes, Sex Crimes & a Tornadic Storm	173
	Night Sprinklers, Agape & the Imposing Shirley Basin	186
	Surgery, Thanksgiving & Homeland Security	204
	Tendinitis, Orthodox Candles & Passport Mayhem	220
Part 3	Russia and Europe	233
		235
	Trans-Siberian Railway, Seized Knees & a Drunken Punch-Up	254
	Heart Arrhythmia, the KGB & a Twilight Pursuit Trumpets, Troubled Gear & New Boots	268
	Hookers, Saints & Vatican City	208
	Money, Monks & Cosmic Energy	295
	Shower Screams, Spilt Blood & Crushing the Serpent's Head	311
	Santiago de Compostela, A Health Scare & Cape Finesterre	328
Epilogue	Australia	335
Lphogue		

7





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Prologue

Australia

11

12

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Limping slightly, one toe bleeding and the other foot recovering from a suspected stress fracture, I hobbled down the aisle of the Church of the Apostles in Launceston, Tasmania. I was home at last after a gruelling year and a half walk around the world. A winter jacket hid my gaunt 196 centimetre frame, leaving only my hollowed, weatherbeaten face to bear witness to what had transpired in that year and a half. I was home, but was withdrawn and felt out of place. Everyone's

apparent comfort and safety seemed ignorant, even foreign.

A few familiar faces turned and smiled, welcoming me home with whispered greetings. The church that had been home throughout my high school years was bigger than I remembered, but looked so plain compared to the churches of Latin America and Europe. Everything looked different, but the major change had occurred within me. Over the previous eighteen months I'd been held at gun point three times, mugged at knife point, bashed, abused, come face to face with dangerous animals, hospitalised, arrested and generally fought for my life more times than I cared to remember. It was no surprise that I'd changed, so much so that the once familiar now looked like fake copies: even the people.

Paying attention during Mass was difficult, distracted by nostalgic thoughts of how many times I'd wondered if I'd ever see home again. When Fr Richard began reading the Sunday Gospel though, my ears pricked up. I smiled. The Catholic Church uses a three-year reading cycle such that the majority of the bible is covered in that time. As he read I realised that it was exactly three years to the day since that whole missionary adventure had begun. The last time I had heard that particular passage I was compelled onto a path towards the complete unity of Christians and a 15 600 kilometres journey—on foot—across twenty countries.

Three years earlier: Melbourne 2005

I picked up a book by Patrick Madrid to read before Sunday Mass. Amongst the compilation of testimonies of men and women who'd become Catholic, I found two testimonies of Evangelical preachers. I was intrigued to know how fundamentalist Evangelicals would end up calling themselves Catholic.

Their stories were remarkable, but what struck me was that their friends and family believed they'd disowned Christ, so reciprocated the gesture by disowning them. I was already aware of countless examples of Church disunity, plus my own struggles with non-Catholic Christians who'd taken fire at my beliefs without any desire for dialogue, but in this moment it was as if I had caught a glimpse of Christ's pain from the broken Church: his body. It was torn apart. I was standing at a car crash and I didn't even know first aid. All I could mutter was, "It's broken."

I quickly distanced myself, "There's nothing I can do. The brokenness is too big." I felt God place on my heart Luke 19:40, so I looked it up. It read, "I tell you that if they keep quiet, the stones themselves will cry out." I shut my bible. The consequences of acting on this heartbreak were difficult to predict.

I headed to Mass, struggling to focus; in fact I made it through to the Gospel without paying attention at all. I tuned in when the priest read, "A man finds a treasure buried in a field and he goes away and sells everything he owns so to purchase the field." I tuned back out. I knew the passage well, but now it was personal. It cut deep and I was left struggling with a pull towards a seemingly impossible mission.

A few days later I expressed my confusion to God. "It's too big! What could I ever do to unite Christians? There's too much division, history and apathy. I'd love to help you but, sorry mate, you're on your own. I'm out."

Once I'd stopped justifying myself it felt like God said, "Sam, you're right, you can't fix it; but I can. It isn't too big for me. I need you to pray for unity."

As simple as that, I was at peace. I didn't have a degree in theology (I'd studied engineering and football) but prayer was something I could definitely do.

After dropping my Land Rover off for a service I walked the 11 kilometres from Mitcham to my work in Burwood, praying. "God," I asked, "if I was to invite others to pray for unity, is there a time in the day that I should ask them to do it?" *Four-Oh-One* popped into my head and I thought, "4:01. 4:01? God, that's stupid! What significance does 4:01 have?" Then it hit me. 4:01 was exactly what I'd been prompted to do—to *pray for one*—that is, to pray: *four, one.* After a quick apology, since it wasn't such a bad idea, I took on the daily 4:01 prayer for unity. I invited friends to set their alarms to do the same—not the engineering friends, the missionary ones—and some did, even taking the extra step of setting their alarm for 4:01 am as an extra sacrifice.

I was content with pm.

Frustration set in though when I attempted to extend the invitation to Christians from various denominations. I was repeatedly knocked back with tacked on advice like: "Unity already exists; you're just not a part of it. When you read your bible you'll become a Christian like us." The steady flow of refusals to even pray for Christian unity wore on me.

Towards the end of 2005, while sitting at the dining table, I flicked through a world atlas. I loved maps and ever since my relatively carefree childhood on Flinders Island with incredible room to roam I'd had a deep

walk4one Paving a Path to Unity 13

thirst for adventure, which almost always began with a highly scrutinised map. My mind drifted back to the division of the Church and, angry at the negative response to the invitation to pray for unity, I thought, "Why won't Christians even pray for unity in truth? How brilliant would it be to just sell up like St Francis did and head out on foot around the world to invite everyone to at least pray for unity?" I traced out a path from South America, through Central and North America, across Russia and down across Eastern Europe and Africa. Apart from the Bering Strait, it was all land. I imagined what it'd be like walking along the Pacific Ocean in Nicaragua or racing an incoming blizzard in Siberia. It was all nonsensical, but the thought of taking the invitation around the world never left me. Over the following year it slowly solidified.

Finding a safe path through Africa was a nightmare, so I looked towards the Atlantic Ocean in Spain as my end point. Aware that this 'action' was rather extreme I met with five people I considered further down their faith-walk than me, and I prayed: "Lord, if all five say yes, I'll do it." As it was, despite the glaring dangers, all five said yes and the fifth person, an elderly gentleman who'd founded Youth Mission Team Australia (my employer), responded with a succinct, "It's too ridiculous to be anything but from God. Go for your life Sammy. Send me a postcard."

The only advice offered from the 'wise five' came from Christopher Prowse, Auxiliary Bishop of Melbourne. He shook his finger at me and pleaded, "This is not to be an attempt at a world record for walking around the world. It's a mission about prayer, not walking. If you're in trouble, take a lift; just never lose sight of the prayer or the people. And take a train through the Siberian winter. You're not interested in evangelising polar bears."

I agreed with a smile.

For twelve months I meticulously compiled an itinerary. I was to begin in far eastern Brazil for 1000 kilometres on foot, then cross the Amazon Basin in vehicles and boats, back on foot across Venezuela and Colombia, fly across the perilous Darian Gap into Panama, on foot all the way to Edmonton in Canada, fly across the Bering Strait to Vladivostok, take the train through Siberia and finish on foot from Moscow to Rome and on to Cape Finisterre in western Spain, from one side of the Atlantic to the other.

I trained hard: swimming, running, weights, playing basketball and walking forty kilometres every Saturday, week in, week out. The first forty-kilometre walk wrecked me, but over time my fitness improved and back-to-back days looked possible. Despite needing Portuguese for Brazil, I tried to learn Spanish, as the majority of the Americas spoke it. I didn't learn much. I saved what money I could and, as 2006 drew to a close, I sold my Land Rover and purchased all the gear I'd need. Everything fitted into one fifty-litre backpack. That was to be my life. As for sponsorship, I didn't seek any. Australians are great at giving money, but I wanted the invitation to be kept clear and simple: prayer.

The most important part of my preparation was spent on my knees. Mum insisted that it'd be safer to travel with a companion. I prayed for someone to join me, but it felt like God asked, "Why are you praying for someone else to join us? You are walking with me." It was difficult to convince people that heading off alone without a support crew would be okay, but I felt a quiet peace despite the enormity of the task.

I'd never even been overseas before.

I finished 2006 at the national YMT debrief in Wollongong, struggling to think of anything other than the journey ahead. I was a few days from setting off and the reality of what I was about to undertake sank in. The YMT founder made an appearance and in a private conversation asked me, "How are you feeling?" With all etiquette out the window I looked him in the eye and said, "I'm shit-scared."

He placed his hand on my shoulder and laughed, "I like your honesty."



SAMPLE

South Amer Part 1

I was naïve, over-confident in my fitness, couldn't speak the language and unsure as to how the mission should unfold. "Ignorance and enthusiasm shall overcome!" To know what the journey ahead would cost might have caused me to cower away. It had to come one moment at a time. The faster I could learn, the better. My greatest regret would take place in Brazil, where I opted for more vehicle travel than Bishop Prowse's instructions perhaps warranted, though recognising soft decisions became part of the mission. Outwardly it was a mission about prayer. Inwardly it was a lesson in trusting God.

Airports, Taxis & Prostitutes 12th-15th Dec 2006

I hoped the 12th of December 2006 wouldn't be the last time I saw home. The twenty-two hour flight to Buenos Aires, Argentina, was long and uncomfortable. Airline seats aren't built for a guy 196 centimetres (6' 5") tall. I might as well have tried to take a nap in a kindergarten chair. The flight was late arriving, so I missed my connecting flight to Sao Paulo, Brazil, and was taxied to a hotel for the night.

The driver did everything but obey the road rules, racing down the highway at 140 km/h oblivious to the road markings and through a few red lights. I was in culture shock the whole way. Big 1960s trucks were everywhere, mostly on the side of the road with the driver dangling from the engine bay. And of all the motorbikes zipping past I only once saw a helmet. Even having previously owned an 1100cc Suzuki I was left dumbstruck.

After a dismal four-hour's sleep I headed back to the airport with a groggy driver who had no idea where to go. He tested my charade and drawing skills, but with an aggressive forward lean, and despite persistent drifting from lane to lane as he nodded off to sleep at 130 km/h, we made it in one piece.

Buenos Aires to Sao Paulo was a quick flight, leaving me with one day to rest before my final flight to Joao Pessoa. I was jet-lagged, didn't speak Portuguese, and fifteen minutes after arriving realised that my next flight was from the other side of the massive city. I jumped on a bus and then a train, but still had no idea where I was.

The view from trains seems to turn up the worst in a city. I'd never seen slums before. I'd never seen barefooted children playing on dirt tracks between shanty homes. I'd never seen so much pollution. The scenes flashing past smashed my preconceived expectations of walking through some of the most beautiful places on Earth. It was bleak.

I stepped off the train at a place called Se, into a confronting mass of yelling homeless men. I now know that they were money exchangers looking to do a deal with the foreigner, but they just scared me. I sought



South America

walk4one Paving a Path to Unity 19

directions at an enormous cathedral towering over the Central Square, but left empty-handed and without being able to extend the invitation to pray for unity. I needed to learn Portuguese fast.

I felt very alone in a city of twenty-five million people. After only one minute I'd encountered beggars, homeless families asleep on the footpath, prostitutes, guards armed with automatic rifles and a group of seedy looking guys who didn't stop staring at me. It was too much. With a mixture of sadness, fear, embarrassment at my wealth and anger, I turned on my heals and skirted back to the relative safety of the cathedral, stopping at each beggar as I went. As I sat amongst the homeless men on the cathedral steps my nose began to bleed. I despised my decision to attempt the journey.

I shared my lunch with a few guys, shrugged my small backpack on and, with the help of a young welldressed man named Tiargo, I found out where I needed to go, jumped in a taxi and headed to a hotel near the second airport to sleep.

After breakfast I set off for the nearest church: Sao Judas. The reception was exceptional, but what stayed with me more than their welcome was the hour-long walk through leafy suburbia to get there. Every house was enclosed by razor wire, electric wire or broken glass cemented into wall tops, and every second corner had a prostitute waiting for her next customer. One woman wasn't wearing anything below the waist and she stood at a corner so the passers-by could see what was on offer. Men driving past approved with toots of the horn and broad smiles. She didn't respond to anything. She was lifeless, distant and used. Each street corner told a similar story and for most the happy ending must have seemed so far away.

I boarded my final flight to the eastern most point of the Americas late in the afternoon, touching down in Joao Pessoa at 2 am. I felt like I'd been walloped around the head with a baseball bat and when I stepped out onto the poorly lit tarmac the thick humidity nearly bowled me over. I wanted to get back on the plane and go home. It was still 30°C and the dense air made the simple act of breathing a workout.

I must have found a hotel because I woke up in one the next morning with a view over a tropical Atlantic beach with all-manner of tropical fruit street-vendors. I was scheduled to begin walking the next day, so took the chance to find the local bishop first. Nearly every single person on the street stopped and stared; tall white guy coming through! The humidity was draining. I dreaded the weeks ahead.

I considered popping in to a school called Lourdese to ask for directions, but couldn't be bothered so pushed on. As I walked past though I found myself staring at a statue pointing back at the school and I had a strong sense that I was supposed to go in. I begrudgingly turned around and headed into the front office and handed over the bishop's address. The secretary read it aloud and a parent sitting in the waiting room jumped up. He knew the place well and offered to drive me. He ushered me into his car and on up to the bishop's office we went. It was my first lesson in trusting God; follow His promptings.

South America

The bishop's office received the 4:01 invitation with a smile and generously organised accommodation for me with a young energetic man from the Fochalare Community. After Mass and dinner I lay down for the final nervous sleep before attempting to travel the world—predominantly on foot—for the unity of the Church. After a journey of airports, taxis and prostitutes, Joao Pessoa also threw up something confronting. In a 500-year-old church near the cathedral sat a statue of Mary holding the infant Jesus. When the Dutch Reformists arrived many generations earlier they'd taken to the 'stone idol' with clubs, smashing it to pieces. The local Catholics then restored it piece-by-piece, using plaster where fragments had been lost permanently. If Christians were prepared to smash or painstakingly restore in the name of truth, how could they refuse the simple act of praying for it? It was a poignant marker for the beginning of the journey. There'd be a lot of smashing and rebuilding to come, mostly with me on the receiving end.

Missions, Bus Drivers & that 47°C 16th-23rd Dec 2006

I was nervous; aware that if I failed in the tropical heat that day the next 5000 kilometres to Mexico would be a near impossibility. My training in Melbourne produced a hottest day no more than 20°C. I wanted nothing more than to finish day one and be able to start the second.

With a man and a woman entangled in a bitter verbal fight nearby I threaded rosary beads through the fence along Cape Branco, with the intention of doing the same at the other end in Spain, if I ever made it. The rosary was a great symbol of both prayer and theological division.

I hit the road at 10:30 am on a cloudless and hot 16th of December 2006, rounding the Cape, avoiding the



First day on the road in Brazil

arguing couple, to a spectacular view over the warm turquoise waters to the city of Joao Pessoa. Locals jumped in and out of the waves while I lugged a twelve-kilogram backpack and already sweating after only a minute.

After five minutes I was lost. A car pulled over and a girl asked in perfect English, "Where are you headed?" Her boyfriend had twice walked as a pilgrim on the Camino de Santiago in Spain and reckoned I must have been one too, though a long way from Spain. They insisted on playing their part in the mission by driving me to the outskirts of town. I didn't think much of it and saw it as a chance to straightaway put the mission before walking, so I jumped in and we drove on discussing the need to pray for unity.

walk4one Paving a Path to Unity 21