

Emerging Challenges for Catholic Social Agencies

By Bruce Duncan

Catholic social agencies already face challenges from the increasing demands on their services and from the need to maintain adequate funding, as well as the difficulty of working with people often in stressful situations.

Underlying these issues is the further question of maintaining a Catholic identity and sense of purpose in their work. The question of identity becomes more pressing with the generational change in the staff. Many of the agencies began as services provided by religious orders, but as the need for professional specialisation increased and the numbers of religious personnel declined, lay people not only staffed the agencies, but increasingly assumed the management positions as well.

In my view, the agencies have managed this stage of transition exceptionally well. The work of the agencies has not only continued, but developed and expanded as well respected organisations, with high morale and a fully professional outlook.

QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY

However the next stage in the transition may be more difficult, as with further staff turnover and development, the internal cultures of the agencies move further away from the religious orientation of the founding years. The more ecumenical climate of our time has fortunately made it possible for much deeper collaboration and understanding between the

different Christian traditions, and members of the other churches continue to contribute mightily to the work of the agencies.

Our agencies have striven to maintain a clear value base which all staff can embrace readily, while maintaining a vibrant sense of Christ's command to care for those disadvantaged or suffering. Most people wishing to work in our agencies would have no problem endorsing a mission statement expressed in such terms, even though an increasing number might be non-Christians or no longer have any real links with their church.

Hence it is likely to become more difficult in the future to maintain a Catholic sense of identity in many agencies, and a lively sense of them fulfilling a key part of the Church's mission.

The problem is not unique to Australia, of course. In his remarkable new book, *A People Adrift: the Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), Peter Steinfels has deftly traced how the changes in western society are affecting the whole Church, including in education, health care systems and the welfare sectors.

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A further aspect is that many of our agencies are delivering services on behalf of government departments. Moreover, some people may not be comfortable expressing an agency's mission in terms of the Church or the Catholic tradition, even though they may appreciate greatly the caring atmosphere in the services provided.

He has no easy answers, of course, but the American experience closely parallels our own in key aspects, and we are both trying to respond to the deep cultural shift known as post-modernism. Many people no longer so closely identify with their churches, or indeed other major institutions like political parties or trade unions. The

sexual abuse crisis has accelerated this process of disaffection by some from the Church.

LAY LEADERSHIP A SUCCESS STORY

Yet there are some positive aspects in recent years that are worth noting. Most obviously, there has been a remarkable and historic shift in leadership from religious personnel to lay people. This is undoubtedly a permanent shift and represents part of the clericalisation of the Church that the Vatican Council encouraged. Yet the process has occurred gradually, and the implications are not all obvious.

Undoubtedly, the agencies and their staff are for many people the human face of the Church. While many people may never go to a church or talk to a priest or minister, the agencies may at times represent a religious presence in their lives. While they are available for all who need their services, the agencies certainly strongly oppose any sort of proselytising, but indirectly they exercise a mission of witness through their service provision.

Moreover, the agencies and their staff are often involved in significant public roles, in advocacy, media and community relations. The agencies have critical roles to play with various governments and their departments, and often must make significant contributions to policy debates. While they generally speak with their own authority and expertise, indirectly they do in part represent the Church. In other words, they exercise important leadership roles within the Catholic and wider community.

NEED TO DEVELOP OUR SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

However, we risk winning some battles but losing the war unless we can help develop and consolidate a social philosophy, strong and cohesive enough to challenge the neoliberal

philosophy which is driving so-called Economic Rationalism and resulting in the growing inequality in Australia and elsewhere.

The irony is that the Catholic tradition is heir to a profound and sophisticated tradition of thought in social philosophy with deep resources

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to draw on in its engagement with the currents of modernity. But in Australia we have not explored or developed this philosophy in a major way, nor brought it into a lively conversation with our culture. We pay lip-service aplenty to it, but barely know it.

It is particularly important that we in the Catholic agencies master this tradition more closely, otherwise we will not be able to contest the increasingly militant individualism and materialism of our age. Up till now we have been able to draw on the good will of earlier generations to support our work. This may change with newer generations more focused on their individual aims.

Considering the immense resources the Church has put into education, with some splendid exceptions we seem to have disappointingly few public intellectuals, people prepared to enter the lists of the public arena and cogently argue issues of social equity, human rights and social justice. This is ground that we must secure, otherwise our agencies and society will pay a heavy price.

Hence I would suggest that Catholic agencies seriously consider how they might promote the development of Catholic social philosophy in an insightful conversation with our

contemporaries. Should we be funding scholarships or promoting research in these areas? How might we help provide platforms for public debate? How might we make better use of publications and other media?

I use the word "conversation" deliberately. We must earn the right to a

hearing today, and can no longer take it for granted. Our contemporaries are likely to interpret any intemperateness on our part as finger-wagging moralism or Church authoritarianism. As Cardinal Walter Kasper said in a recent visit to Australia, there can be no 'retreat into a ghetto'. We must move forward in a respectful dialogue with our culture, treasuring the uniqueness of our faith, but also being a listening Church, recognising the complexity of the truth about God and humanity.

Would it not be marvellous if our contemporaries could hear us not just uttering words of compassion for those in difficulty, but as diligently searching for the deeper truths of our social being, attentive to different points of view and clearly recognising conscience as that most sacred place in our hearts where we are alone with God? This is the type of conversation one imagines that Jesus had – especially, as we are told, at parties!

Pope John Paul I chose as his motto, 'Humility'. It would not be a bad motto for the whole Church at this time, and a helpful one if we are to join in a fresh conversation with our culture. *

Fr Bruce Duncan – Consultant to CSSV.