

22nd September 2021

Open Letter to Plenary Council Members

The mission of Catholic Social Services Victoria (CSSV) is to assist the Catholic Church in Victoria to fulfil the gospel imperatives to stand with and serve the poor, disadvantaged and marginalised; and work for a just, equitable and compassionate society. CSSV is auspiced by the Archbishop of Melbourne and Bishops of Sale, Sandhurst and Ballarat. CSSV includes 45 member organisations comprising 7000 staff, 17,000 volunteers and serving more than 200,000 people in need in Victoria every year. CSSV is guided by the example of Jesus and the gospel principles enshrined in Catholic Social Teaching:

- *The Dignity of the Human Person and Preference for the Poor*
- *The Common Good*
- *Solidarity*
- *Subsidiarity*

Catholic social services are deeply embedded both in the Australian community and in the life of the Church. CSSV encourages people working within the agencies to embrace the mission of Christ, and plpusing members experience, contribute to the emerging directions of the Church. Connection and dialogue with Bishops, clergy, religious and parish members is essential to fulfil the Church's mission and to be part of the spirit of transformation. We, and all Church leaders, can look to the person and role of Saint Mary MacKillop for inspiration. CSSV encourages all agencies to continue engagement in the process of discerning the future of the Church in Australia. **This will require a national consultative mechanism to continue the synodal work stimulated by this Plenary Council.**

CSSV has engaged in the Plenary Council process, hosting initial listening and dialogue workshops, preparing our own submission and encouraging members to do so. Two CSSV Council members were involved in the subsequent process that resulted in the six themed discernment papers.

CSSV supports the content of the six themed discernment papers. This letter urges that additional emphasis be placed on a small number of actions to strengthen the church within a contemporary cultural context. CSSV wishes to see a future Church that clearly demonstrates the principles of Catholic Social Teaching and a Church that is distinctly Australian, reflecting values of gender equity, respect for the traditional owners of the land, embracing the multi-cultural and immigrant makeup of society and is committed to healing of the land and care for God's environment.

This letter is focused on four of the questions on the Agenda for the Plenary Council meeting. In addition, **CSSV recommends that the structure of the agenda going forward should have an additional outward-looking theme: Justice and Equity.** CSSV offers to expand on this theme, with other parties, if acceptable to the Council.



How might the Church in Australia meet the needs of the most vulnerable, go to the peripheries, be missionary in places that may be overlooked or left behind in contemporary Australia?

The guidance of Saint Mary MacKillop leads us to open our hearts to all Australians, not just Catholics, and to strive to give everyone a 'fair go'. Charity and Justice go hand in hand, and together, give Hope. The Church has a strong tradition of service to the poor, the asylum seeker and the marginalised. This Christ-centred work gives life to the *dignity of the human person and preference for the poor*. The Church and its agencies can, based on principles of Catholic Social Teaching, 'speak truth to power'. Parishes and voluntary groups have been the mainstay of charity. Local efforts benefit from coordination and leadership at diocesan, state and national level to tackle the systemic issues. The Church should have a strong and public advocacy role. This requires ensuring there is strong and capable leadership and resources for state and national Catholic social justice advocacy bodies. The Church relies on hardworking social service agencies, including voluntary, professional and religious. Many are struggling for survival and to have their voices heard. Increasing Government regulation restricts charitable agencies from a role in advocacy. This constrains efforts towards *common good*. Recently, national Church advocacy bodies have lost Church funding at a time when we need to be building a capable voice, independent of government. Strong advocacy requires a credible position, research, relationships and communication.

The Plenary Council should give specific recognition to underlying generational injustice in Australia. There are many issues but a small number of specific issues clamour for action: reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, gender inequity, and care for the environment: the cry of the earth and cry of the poor. The *Common Good* demands a public commitment from the Church to action and advocacy on these matters.

Recommended Actions for the Plenary Council:

- *The ACBC and dioceses should commit to a long-term capability for the church to be a voice for those at the periphery, at state and national levels, for the common good.*
- *The 'Parish as Centre of Service' subsidiarity model can be more widely promoted by dioceses.*
- *ACBC and Dioceses should express solidarity with Indigenous leadership in the movement towards truth telling, treaty and voice.*

How might the Church in Australia be better structured for mission, considering the parish, the diocese, religious orders, the PJPs and new communities?

The first step is for Church leaders to get past the paradigms of clerical/lay divide and under-representation of women, which permeates, erodes enthusiasm and creates the grounds for sub-optimal performance. Pope Francis calls for a synodal approach and for collaboration. This requires full respect, trust and a shared model of leadership inclusive of clerical and the extensive willingness of professional, religious and voluntary people. We can't afford to be anything other than highly effective.

In day-to day ministry, social service agencies deal with people in the context of their cultural existence, their trauma and their real-life struggles. To be informed by this wealth of experience would allow us to shape a Church based on their context, that is, an Australian Church.



Much has been said about the need for inclusion, transparency and accountability. It is time to get on with it. There are many semi-autonomous bodies within the church working to their own ethos, mission and function. This brilliant work is proof of the principle of *subsidiarity* in action. However, there are growing disparities between small and large, voluntary and corporate, strong or weak identification as Catholic in contemporary times. This results in fragmentation. It is time to strengthen the body of the Church in Australia as a mission-driven, co-ordinated and effective force within the Australian cultural context. There is much opportunity for new alliances and collaboration, but it will require serious effort to build relationships, adapt and align. The hallmarks of an effective collaborative church must be that it is: mission-driven, inclusive, transparent and accountable. The Plenary Council is a start, but the dialogue must continue with a regular mechanism to enable this to occur.

Recommended Actions for the Plenary Council:

- *Plenary Council recommend a new strategic conversation to create a new paradigm of an Australian Catholic Church, guided by the spirit of Saint Mary McKillop.*
- *Commit to a long-term program of a triennial summit of Church organisations in the broadest sense, to keep the mission relevant, improve co-ordination and foster sustained programs of formation.*

How might the People of God, lay and ordained, women and men, approach governance in the spirit of synodality and co-responsibility for more effective proclamation of the Gospel?

Much work has recently been done on this by the Governance Review Project Team of the Royal Commission Implementation Advisory Group. The ACBC has responded, supporting most recommendations, and referring the report to the Plenary Council but there needs to be reasonably rapid implementation to move towards good governance, including actively seeking change on those matters seen to be constrained by Church law.

Recommended Actions for the Plenary Council:

- *Immediately and fully implement (as far as possible) the recommendations of 'The light from the Southern Cross: Promoting Co-responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia'.*

How might we better see the future of Catholic social services agencies, and health and aged care ministries as key missionary and evangelising agencies?

The best way to 'see' is to continue with 'see, judge, act'. This starts with fully embracing the recent words of Pope Francis to be active on the peripheries, to bring mercy and to be missionary. Catholic social service agencies offer much grace and gravitas to the Church by publicly demonstrating Christ's love in action. Evangelisation is carried about by activating the values of the gospel. The future for Catholic social service agencies is to remain firmly based on principles of Catholic Social Teaching whilst adapting and responding to those most in need, experiencing disadvantage and marginalisation. This includes recognition of the collective role in addressing the structural causes of disadvantage through strong advocacy.

We have in Australia a marvellous heritage of the founding religious leaders who came to a new colony to serve and evangelise. Their ethos is strongly preserved and carried forward by many committed people and agencies. Countless thousands of voluntary, religious and professional people, are and will continue to be the 'hands and feet of Christ'.



How should this be seen? It should be seen as fundamental and central to the presence of the Catholic Church in Australia. In fact, these agencies do a great deal to bridge the cultural divide between the public perception of clerical church and mainstream Australian culture. It is a bridge which may be strengthened by all of the actions listed in this letter.

Catholic Social Services are also places where people of all faiths, or no faith, work and volunteer. Our organisations should be places where we model the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, invest in formation and ensure a welcoming and safe environment for all.

Recommended Actions for the Plenary Council:

- *The final statements of the Plenary Council should affirm the importance of Catholic Social Teaching and strongly affirm the ongoing role of Catholic Social service agencies in the mission of the church.*
- *Church leadership should ensure the sustainability of peak co-ordinating social service bodies at state and national levels.*
- *Church leadership nationally and Catholic Social Service agencies should continue to invest in formation for staff and volunteers, to grow a deeper understanding of how Catholic Social Teaching principles may influence our approach to inclusion, charity and justice.*

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On behalf of the CSSV Council