

Catholic agencies: Making a distinct contribution to Australian social welfare provision?

Beth R. Crisp, PhD
Associate Professor in Social Work
School of Health and Social Development
Deakin University
Waterfront Campus
Geelong
Victoria
Australia 3217
beth.crisp@deakin.edu.au (email)

A notable contributor to social welfare in Australia

The Catholic Church is one of the largest providers of social welfare services in Australia, with estimates as to the number of persons receiving services annually ranging from half a million¹ to more than one million². Although more than three-quarters of Catholic welfare agencies have been established since the mid 1970s, a few have been providing services to Australians since the early part of the 19th century³. Nevertheless,

The range of quality of services provided by the Church has not been well recognised. The church's role as a major provider throughout the last 170 years has not been well documented or embedded in the social policy discourse. ...

The negative publicity that has surrounded some in the Church has negated to some extent the 'good works' undertaken by the Church over the last 170 years. It is timely that the 'hidden' nature of these services needs to be 'put out there for all to see' and celebrated.⁴

One example of the 'hidden' nature of Catholic contributions is that historical accounts of Australian social work have mostly failed to recognise the significant influence of Catholic social workers and agencies in the development of welfare

¹ Peter Camilleri and Gail Winkworth, 'Mapping the Catholic social services', *Australasian Catholic Record*, 81/2 (2004): 184-197.

² Catholic Social Services Australia, *About CSSA* <<http://www.catholicssocialservices.org.au/node/39188>>, accessed 3 December 2009.

³ Camilleri and Winkworth, 'Mapping the Catholic social services'.

⁴ Peter Camilleri and Gail Winkworth, 'Catholic social services in Australia: A short history', *Australian Social Work*, 58/1 (2005): 76-85, here 84.

provision including professional social work services in this country.⁵ Notable Catholic contributors include Father John McMahon who in the 1920s went from Perth to study his doctorate at the Catholic University in Washington DC where he came into contact with the National School of Social Sciences, which had been established by the university as a college for women to study social services. McMahon negotiated the scholarships which were taken up in 1928 by Norma Parker and Constance Moffitt who were Catholic students at the University of Western Australia, and who on their return are credited as being Australia's first trained social workers. Within a few years, their achievements include the establishment of social work services at St Vincents Hospital Melbourne, St Vincents Hospital Sydney and Catholic Social Service Bureau in Melbourne.⁶ Norma Parker became a noted academic, was the first president of the Australian Association of Social Workers from 1946 to 1954 and her efforts contributed to the development of the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).⁷ However of committees on which she was a member, claims would be made that there was no Catholic representation.⁸ Catholic social workers also played a pivotal role in establishing social work services in South Australia⁹ and in Sydney contributed to the

⁵ Damian J. Gleeson, 'Some new perspectives on early Australian social work', *Australian Social Work*, 61/3 (2008): 207-225; Lesley Hughes, 'Catholics and the care of destitute of children in late nineteenth century New South Wales', *Australian Social Work*, 51/1 (1998): 17-25.

⁶ D.J. Gleeson, 'Professional social workers and welfare bureaus: The origins of Australian Catholic social work', *Australasian Catholic Record*, 77 (2000): 185-202.

⁷ Australian Women's Register, *Parker, Norma Alice (1906-2004)*. <<http://www.womenaustralia.info/biogs/IMP0264b.htm>>, accessed 28 November 2009.

⁸ Gleeson, 'Some new perspectives'.

⁹ Gleeson, 'Some new perspectives'.

establishment of the Catholic Welfare Bureau, which by the 1950s had become a major provider of social services in Sydney.¹⁰ In the early 1960s, when the Federal Government started funding marriage counselling, it was Catholic organisations which fought for these new programs to be staffed by qualified social workers.¹¹ Catholic agencies continue to establish innovative welfare services to this day.¹²

A distinct contribution?

Although Catholic social workers and Catholic agencies have made a substantial contribution to welfare provision in Australia, the question arises as to whether this has been distinctive.¹³ There is some support for such a contention in respect of welfare provision the 19th and earlier parts of the twentieth centuries.¹⁴ In the 21st century, a not uncommon response to such a question is that Catholic social welfare provision is underpinned by Catholic Social Teachings of which the core principles include dignity of the person emerging from an understanding of the worth of human life; the notion of 'common good' which recognises the rights and choices of individuals need to be balanced with those of the broader community; a 'preferential option for the poor' which seeks to direct resources to those who are most in need; and a recognition that membership of the human community bestows on individuals

¹⁰ Gleeson, 'Professional social workers'.

¹¹ D.J. Gleeson, 'The foundation and first decade of the National Catholic Welfare Committee', *Australasian Catholic Record*, 85/1 (2008): 15-36.

¹² Suellen Murray, S., Jenny Malone, and Jenny Glare, 'Building a life story: Providing records and support to former residents of children's homes', *Australian Social Work*, 61/3 (2008): 239-255.

¹³ Ray Reid, 'Personal morality and counselling within a Catholic agency', *Australasian Catholic Record*, 85/4 (2008): 429-441.

¹⁴ Helen Belcher, 'Explaining a paradox: Church and health policy in the 1940s and 1970s', *Australasian Catholic Record*, 85/3 (2008): 259-273; Hughes, 'Catholics and the care of destitute of children'.

a range of rights and protections as well as duties and obligations.¹⁵ Hence, for Catholic agencies, there is an implicit obligation to:

- i. Provide services which promote the inherent dignity of the individual and each individual's participation in family life and community networks
- ii. Provide services which are accessible, particularly to the most disadvantaged in the community
- iii. Speak out publicly so as to improve public policies and programs and identify areas of unmet human need.¹⁶

Nevertheless, Catholic social teachings are not widely understood at anything more than a superficial basis and in Australia it has been claimed that:

Catholics have a very rich inheritance of social thought, but ... make very poor use of it, despite vast practical efforts in the fields of health, education and social services. We have very few specialists in this area even in the theological colleges or the universities ... Although we have developed a great rhetoric of social justice in Catholic circles, and have clearly identified a set of principles to guide our policies, we have

¹⁵ Catholic Social Services Australia, *About CSSA*; Philip Mendes, *Australia's Welfare Wars: The Players, the Politics and the Ideologies* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2003).

¹⁶ Catholic Social Welfare Commission as cited in Gail Winkworth and Peter Camilleri, 'Keeping the faith: The impact of human services restructuring on Catholic Social Welfare services', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 39 (2004): 315-328, here 318.

barely begun to explore their implications beyond our immediate concerns.¹⁷

One of the implications of Catholic social teachings is that Catholic welfare provision should be aiming to provide the services which communities and individuals need. This is far from new and for example, it has been said that back in the 16th century:

The first Jesuits opted out of patterns of ministry centred on local churches, and sought to serve wherever the need was greatest: 'we accept the care of those for whose well-being and salvation either no one cares at all, or else they care negligently'.¹⁸

However, this may be difficult to achieve in the contemporary funding context, with many Catholic agencies being highly, and in some cases almost totally, reliant financially on contracts funding from government sources which specify what services must be provided.¹⁹ Interviews with the chief executives of a number of Catholic agencies have revealed that while external funding may cover direct program costs, agencies were not being reimbursed for increased infrastructure costs associated with running these programs.²⁰ Hence, any discretionary funding that agencies might have wanted to use to provide additional services, may be required to provide infrastructure support for funded programs.

¹⁷ Bruce Duncan, 'Catholic efforts to combat unemployment', *Australasian Catholic Record*, 81/1 (2004): 17-31, here 30.

¹⁸ Philip Endean, 'The Ignatian tradition of The Way', *The Way*, 42/1 (2003): 7-21, here 9.

¹⁹ Camilleri and Winkworth, 'Mapping the Catholic social services'.

²⁰ Winkworth and Camilleri, 'Keeping the faith'.

The extent to which contracting arrangements in which local agencies tender to be the local provider in statewide programs can lead to similar offerings by very different nongovernment agencies, and potentially limit a Catholic distinctiveness in service provision being apparent to service users. In other words, the situation may emerge in which church agencies 'have become so fully integrated into the community that their work is typically viewed as merely another component of the continuum of care'.²¹ From the perspective of outsiders, that some welfare agencies are auspiced by churches would seem to be a quirk of history and the notion of them being faith-based agencies is questionable.²²

If Catholic agencies are not necessarily running different programs from other agencies, distinctiveness is nevertheless possible depending on how programs are delivered. Ray Reid who works for Centacare in New South Wales has argued that the ethical or moral stance which underpins service delivery should be a distinctive feature of Catholic social service delivery:

... a Catholic service must be recognisable in its actual delivery. In my view, one recognisable aspect would be that, in the actual delivery of services, no personal action, taken or being considered by a client, which clearly is in clear contravention of Catholic moral teaching is ever

²¹ Joanne Ebear, Rick Csiernik and Michael Béchar, 'Is there a place for social work within the catholic church?'. *Critical Social Work*, 7/1 (2006), <<http://criticalsocialwork.com/>>, accessed 19 December 2009.

²² Rose Melville and Catherine MacDonald, 'Faith-based organisations and contemporary welfare', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 41 (2006): 69-85.

explicitly approved or advocated by a worker who is acting in the name of the Catholic Church.²³

Reid goes on to argue that workers in Catholic agencies are obliged to go against their professional codes of ethics which place the emphasis on self determination by service users and provide advice which is consistent with Church teachings. Others have also claimed an 'inevitable conflict between religious and social work values'²⁴, although such claims overlook the existence of a diversity of Christian viewpoints as to the causes and solutions to social problems.²⁵ Furthermore, a comparison of Catholic social teachings and the Canadian Social Work Code of Ethics revealed much common ground, even though arising out of very different philosophies.²⁶ In summary, there seems to be divided opinion as to whether a Catholic perspective results in a distinctive ethical emphasis in service delivery.

Perhaps the most persuasive arguments that Catholic agencies make a distinct contribution to welfare provision in Australia centre around spirituality. To some extent, the huge growth of Catholic agencies in the welfare sector since the mid 1970s has been attributed to some religious orders changing the focus of their activities from schools to welfare provision.²⁷ Although other staff were employed, the presence of members of religious orders and their shaping of agency cultures

²³ Reid, 'Personal morality, 429-430.

²⁴ Chris Stewart, 'The inevitable conflict between religious and social work values', *Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, 28 (2009): 35-47, here 35.

²⁵ Christopher M. Duncan, C.M. and Diane B. Moore, 'Catholic and Protestant social discourse and the American welfare state', *Journal of Poverty*, 7/3 (2003): 57-83.

²⁶ Ebear et al, 'Is there a place for social work?'

²⁷ Camilleri and Winkworth, 'Mapping the Catholic social services'.

was influential in their establishment of these agencies. An ongoing legacy is that the ethos in many Catholic agencies attracts some staff who choose working there rather than in higher paid positions elsewhere. When interviewed a few years ago, the CEO of one Catholic agency commented:

I think the adherence to a mission and vision draws in creative people who are looking beyond mere recompense. An awful lot of staff don't do it for the money ...I think there is a link between the fidelity to a vision for people in the community and the drawing in of creative people.²⁸

With the decline of numbers in religious orders in recent decades and the ageing profile of those who remain, the ability of orders to provide staff in welfare agencies has become increasingly limited, and it is not hard to envisage a future of Catholic welfare agencies in which clerics or members of religious orders are an extinct species of employee. However, this does not necessarily mean that agencies need be devoid of a Catholic spirituality. Rather it might just mean that agencies need to work more intentionally on this aspect of their mission and not just assume that it will happen because of their staffing profile.

The organisational context

Unlike in the 19th and earlier parts of the 20th century when those who served by Catholic agencies were overwhelmingly Catholic,²⁹ service users in Catholic agencies today may be of any, or increasingly, no religion. Similarly, staff in Catholic

²⁸ In Winkworth and Camilleri, 'Keeping the faith', 324.

²⁹ Gleeson, 'Some new perspectives'; Hughes 'Catholics and the care of destitute of children'.

agencies come with a range of religious backgrounds and many do not identify as Catholic, and some would not regard themselves as being Christian. Therefore, if spirituality is to be an important aspect of contemporary Catholic welfare agencies, past assumptions and practices may need to be reconsidered.

Over the past decade there has been a growing literature about spirituality in organisations. One of the strands of such writing has focused on spiritual experiences within the workplace, especially those leading to personal growth of individuals.³⁰ A second strand is about leadership and management styles³¹ and a third stand is around corporate values and ethics, particularly around being a good corporate citizen and not just interested in profits.³² One understanding of an organisation in which spirituality is valued is the so-called contemplative organisation. A contemplative organisation is one which strives to:

- Incorporate contemplative practices into all aspects of work;
- Embody and explore organizational values;
- Move between cycles of action and reflection;
- Balance process with product;

³⁰ Gregory N.P. Konz and Francis X. Ryan 'Maintaining an organizational spirituality: No easy task', *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 12/3 (1999): 200-210.

³¹ Donal Dorr, *Faith at Work: A Spirituality of Leadership* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2006); Peter Gilbert, *Leadership: Being Effective and Remaining Human* (Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing, 2005).

³² John Milliman, Jeffery Ferguson, David Trickett and Bruce Condemi, 'Spirit and community at Southwest Airlines: An investigation of a spiritual values-based model', *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 12/3 (1999): 221-223.

- Have an organizational structure which reflects a contemplative philosophy.³³

Donal Dorr, who is an Irish Catholic author has suggested that terms such as 'harmony, trust, good communication, cooperation, transparency and honesty'³⁴ are among the attributes of an organisation which values spirituality. Clearly the management and leadership of an organisation have a crucial role to play in establishing and maintaining such an organisational culture. However, organisations which supposedly share a common religious tradition don't necessarily reflect this in their philosophy or working practices. For example, the authors of a study of the mission statements of all 28 Jesuit universities in the US have commented that while they might have expected to find

... the same spirituality, enunciated in the same basic manner. Such does not appear to be the case with Jesuit universities. Terms essential to a characterization of organizations founded on a specific spirituality are sometimes absent and sometimes redefining in remarkably different ways. For example, almost all of the universities declare themselves to be Jesuit, yet the term goes undefined or is defined differently by each organization.³⁵

While a religious ethos underpins the broad aims and objectives of Catholic agencies with a religious auspice, the language by which this is communicated to the wider

³³ Maia Duerr, 'The contemplative organization', *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 17/1 (2004): 43-61, here 50.

³⁴ Dorr, *Faith at Work*, 55.

³⁵ Konz and Ryan, 'Maintaining an organizational spirituality', 208.

world may have been translated to something more like an 'imperative to care'.³⁶ This raises the question as to what is understood by 'spirituality'. Spirituality has been described as 'obscure',³⁷ 'fuzzy'³⁸ and 'a word everybody uses, but nobody knows what anyone means by it'³⁹. For example, spirituality is used by some as an interchangeable terms for religious practice and assumes the spiritual person to be one who has an intentional relationship with the Christian God. In stark contrast, God seems to have been totally excised from some people's understandings of spirituality, and spirituality is defined in terms of meaning. However it is defined, for any working conceptualisation of spirituality to have a degree of authenticity, it needs to be able to deal with the struggles and messiness of human life⁴⁰ rather than as a 'quasi-indicator of mental health'⁴¹ or panacea to life's problems as is suggested by the following definition:

³⁶ Bernard Moss, 'Spirituality: A personal perspective', in Neil Thompson (ed) *Loss and Grief: A Guide for Human Services Practitioners* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 39.

³⁷ Ralph W. Hood, Bernard Spilka, Bruce Hunsberger and Richard Gorsuch, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach*, 2nd edition (New York: Guildford Press, 1996), 115.

³⁸ Brian J. Zinnbauer, Kenneth I. Pargament, Brenda Cole, Mark S. Rye, Eric M. Butter, Timothy G. Belavich, Kathleen M. Hipp, Allie B. Scott and Jill L. Kadar, 'Religion and spirituality: Unfuzzing the fuzzy', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 36/4 (1997): 549-564, here 549.

³⁹ Stuart Rose, 'Is the term "spirituality" a word everybody uses, but nobody knows what anyone means by it?', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 16/2 (2001): 193-207, here 193.

⁴⁰ Mark F.T. Chater, 'Spirituality as struggle: Poetics, experience and the place of the spiritual encounter', *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 5/2 (2000): 193-201.

⁴¹ Harold G. Koenig, 'Religion, spirituality and medicine in Australia: Research and clinical practice', *Medical Journal of Australia*, 186/10 (2007): S45-S46, here S45.

Spirituality is a personal search for meaning and purpose in life, which may or may not be related to religion. It entails connection to self-chosen and or religious beliefs, values, and practices that give meaning to life, thereby inspiring and motivating individuals to achieve their optimal being. This connection brings faith, hope, peace and empowerment. The results are joy, forgiveness of oneself and others, awareness and acceptance of hardship and mortality, a heightened sense of physical and emotional well-being, and the ability to transcend beyond the infirmities of existence.⁴²

In seeking to make sense of, and respond to, contemporary thinking about spirituality, the question may arise as might be whether Catholic social service agencies have sufficient expertise in spirituality to consider these issues on their own. At one level, there may be a need for agencies to be engaging in dialogue with theologians.⁴³ Welfare agencies may also be able to partner with Catholic retreat houses and other centres of spirituality in developing programs or other initiatives which contribute to meeting the spiritual needs of service users. However, it has been suggested that the offerings of retreat centres have often been irrelevant to service users of welfare agencies:

... most of the programmes offered at churches and retreat centres are focussed on individual growth, and often seem ... 'more concerned with domestication than liberation, with the *status quo* than new birth'.

⁴² Ruth A. Tanyi, 'Towards a classification of the meaning of spirituality', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 39 (2002): 500-50, here 506.

⁴³ Janice Clarke, 'A critical view of how nursing has defined spirituality', *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 18/12 (2009): 1666-1673.

Moreover, spirituality is often regarded as transcending the concerns of this world rather than being immersed in the messiness of daily life.⁴⁴

One group of people who are 'immersed in the messiness of daily life' are the social workers and other direct service staff in Catholic welfare agencies. However, such staff may find it difficult to discuss religion or spirituality in their professional work, and until recently it was more than likely that social work students might never hear the words religion or spirituality during their professional training. Within social work, religious behaviours have often been viewed as evidence of psychopathology and caution has sometimes resulted in all persons, whether workers or service users, with religious beliefs being treated with suspicion.⁴⁵ Consequently, many social workers have themselves been encouraged to keep their religious beliefs and practice privatised and something which they do not discuss in the workplace.⁴⁶

Agencies making it known to staff that spirituality is considered to have a legitimate place in social service provision, by itself will not be sufficient to entice many social workers to change their ways of working. Staff development programs in which social workers have the opportunities to explore the synchronicities and tensions between their understandings of both social work and spirituality are likely to be required. To support such enterprises, there have been several monographs

⁴⁴ Christine Valters Paintner, 'The practice of contemplation as witness and resistance', *The Way*, 46/4 (2007): 35-47, here 35.

⁴⁵ James Clark, 'Should social work education address religious issues? No!', *Journal of Social Work Education*, 30/1 (1994): 12-16.

⁴⁶ See Beth R. Crisp, 'Beyond the seminary: New frontiers for teaching spirituality', *Religious Education*, 104/1 (2009): 4-17; Philip Gilligan and Sheila Furness, 'The role of religion and spirituality in social work practice: Views and experiences of social workers and students', *British Journal of Social Work*, 36/4 (2006): 617-637; Rae Lindsay, *Recognizing Spirituality: The Interface between Faith and Social Work* (Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2002).

dedicated to the subject of spirituality and social care which have emerged in recent years⁴⁷ as well as a plethora of articles in social work journals. However, not all of these promote understandings of spirituality which might be recognisable or acceptable within a Catholic framework. One recent book discussing aspects of spirituality and human service delivery included contributions from authors from a diverse range of perspectives including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Paganism as well as contributions from indigenous Australians.⁴⁸ It has also been claimed that there are synergies between social work theory and New Age spiritualities.⁴⁹

Approaches to service delivery

One approach to incorporating spirituality into social work practice has been to offer small numbers of staff or students the opportunity to learn more about the practices of a spiritual tradition, such as the spiritual exercises of St Ignatius Loyola.⁵⁰ Indeed it has been suggested that

There are thus close links between the spirituality of the Exercises and the margins of church and society, the places where questions are

⁴⁷ For example, Fran Gale, Natalie Bolzan, and Dorothy McRae-McMahon, D. (eds), *Spirited Practices: Spirituality and the Helping Professions* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2007); Lindsay, *Recognizing Spirituality*, Bernard Moss, *Religion and Spirituality* (Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing, 2005); Mary Nash and Bruce Stewart, *Spirituality and Social Care: Contributing to Personal and Community Well-being* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2002); Simon Robinson, *Spirituality, Ethics and Care* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008).

⁴⁸ Gale et al, *Spirited Practices*.

⁴⁹ Mel Gray, 'Viewing spirituality in social work through the lens of contemporary social theory', *British Journal of Social Work*, 38/1 (2008): 175-196.

⁵⁰ For example, Edward J. Gumz, Jack C. Wall, and Susan F. Grossman, 'Ignatian spirituality: The Spiritual Exercises and social work', *Social Thought*, 22/1 (2003): 143-158; Janice M. Staral, 'Introducing Ignatian spirituality: Linking self-reflection with social work ethics', *Social Work and Christianity*, 30/1 (2003): 38-51.

being asked of inherited tradition, the places where images of the self are being renegotiated.⁵¹

While there may be a place for offering such opportunities, a much more creative approach is going to be needed if Catholic welfare agencies are to engage on the level of the spiritual with more than a handful of staff or service users. In my own work in which I have been exploring the connections between spirituality and social work, I have suggested that

Spirituality involves an awareness of the other, which may be God or other human or divine beings or something else, which provides the basis for us to ask establish our needs and desires for, understand our experiences of, and ask questions about, meaning, identity, connectedness, transformation and transcendence. While for some individuals these concerns will be integrally associated with their religious beliefs, and may only make sense within a specific religious framework, meaning, identity, connectedness, transformation and transcendence are intrinsic to the human experience, whether or not individuals regard these to be in the realm of spirituality.⁵²

Undoubtedly conceptualising spirituality in this way is contentious. However, if you are going to convince social workers that spirituality (or anything else for that matter), is relevant to their practice, you need to be able to explain it in language which they might understand and words such as meaning, identity, connectedness and transformation are very much part of the contemporary social worker's vocabulary.

⁵¹ Endean, 'The Ignatian tradition of The Way', 9-10.

⁵² Beth R. Crisp, *Spirituality and Social Work* (Farnham: Ashgate, forthcoming).

Whether or not we have the remit to assist individuals in resolving these, acknowledging and validating these concerns is a fundamental way in which social workers can and should show respect for the spiritual dimension of the lives service users.⁵³ This need not require either considerable time or specialist expertise on behalf of the social worker, but rather a change of perspective:

... spiritual care is much more than simply an added task to be done or an extra skill that has to be learned. Rather, it has to do with seeing the world differently, and in seeing it differently, acting differently within it. Spiritual care has to do with asking different questions of those to whom we care and, equally as importantly, being equipped and prepared to respond appropriately and openly to the answers one receives. Spiritual care is as much a way of being as a way of acting.⁵⁴

This might involve a more conscious focus on the strengths and not just the deficits of service users. It is worth remembering that one of the strengths of Catholic welfare provision has long been its sense of caring for the person and not just that aspect which is problematic.⁵⁵ For social workers, attending to the lived experience of service users means listening for meaning rather than making assumptions as to what individuals make of situations or events, what they consider gives their life meaning, determining how important it is in the current situation, and the extent to which such experiences can form a resource in dealing with particular circumstances

⁵³ Paul H. Wilson, 'Memory, personhood and faith', in Albert Jewell (ed) *Spirituality and Ageing* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1999).

⁵⁴ John Swinton, *Spirituality and Mental Health Care: Rediscovering a 'Forgotten' Dimension* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001), 175.

⁵⁵ Lesley Hughes, 'Social care work in the recent past: Revisiting the professional/ amateur dichotomy', *Australian Social Work*, 61/3 (2008): 226-238.

or may be adding the problem.⁵⁶ As one Canadian social worker interviewed in a research study noted:

I say, I'm really interested in understanding what this means for you. And is there anything about your own cultural background, or what this means in your own community, that would be helpful for me to understand, because I may not know that. I'm not going to assume anything ... I'm going to wait and hear how it's been constructed in their lives.⁵⁷

As to going about this, much of the literature from Catholic traditions of spirituality taps into issues which have direct applicability for social work practitioners. There is a strong emphasis on the importance of lived experience and a recognition that the needs, outlooks and experiences of people vary at different point in the lifespan. Some of the themes considered by writers of Catholic spirituality are issues which can readily be incorporated into social work practice in a range of settings, such as rituals⁵⁸, creativity⁵⁹, the importance of place⁶⁰, and belonging⁶¹. These topics

⁵⁶ Larry Culliford, 'Taking a spiritual history', *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, 13 (2007): 212-219.

⁵⁷ In Janet L. Clark, 'Listening for meaning: A research-based model for attending to spirituality, culture and worldview in social work practice', *Critical Social Work*, 7/1 (2006), <<http://criticalsocialwork.com/>>, accessed 19 December 2009.

⁵⁸ Bernard Cooke and Gary Macy, *Christian Symbol and Ritual: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁵⁹ Christine Valters Paintner, 'Responding to beauty's call: The shape of an aesthetic spirituality', *The Way*, 44/4 (2005): 36-47.

⁶⁰ Simone Weil, (1952) *The Need for Roots* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952).

⁶¹ Brendan Callaghan, 'What does it mean to belong?', *The Way*, 38 (1998): 108-116.

provide a way of beginning conversations in which spiritual issues and values and beliefs may surface, and by opening up discussion on these topics, service users may choose to respond by discussing specific religious practices or beliefs which are important to them.⁶² This is not to say social workers should always avoid explicitly raising issues of religion, but to suggest that attending to spiritual needs should not be limited to those service users whom social workers are confident would respond positively to discussions about their religious beliefs and practices.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Catholic agencies have and can continue to make a distinct contribution to social welfare provision in Australia, by offering models of service delivery which have sought not to excise the spiritual from the more prosaic needs with which individuals present when seeking assistance from welfare providers. However, for this to be most effective, a whole of agency approach is required rather than leaving consideration of matters spiritual to those staff involved in direct service delivery. There are many challenges and dilemmas which agencies are undoubtedly going to have to address if they want to ensure spirituality is on their agendas in the 21st century. But the fact that several Catholic agencies wish to pursue this agenda,⁶³ is from my perspective, a feature that distinguishes Catholic welfare agencies not just from the more secular agencies but also from some of the other supposedly faith-based agencies.

⁶² These ideas are expanded further in Beth R. Crisp, 'Social work and spirituality in a secular society', *Journal of Social Work*, 8 (2008): 361-373.

⁶³ An earlier version of this paper was presented to representatives of a number of Catholic welfare agencies in Victoria who form Esther's Voice, a forum discussing the place of spirituality in the human services.