

28 August 2020

Letter to Members of Catholic Social Services Victoria

NOW is the time for your voice.

It is a changing world and one dominated by various crises at this point in time. We wonder, what is next? Events of 2020 have caused additional suffering to many and severely tested the effectiveness of our support systems. For some, the crises have come in waves; they are still struggling when the next wave hits. And yet — we continue, we learn and we adapt. Importantly, we adapt while keeping firm with our purpose and values. The whole of CSSV members, staff and volunteers can stand by our convictions to preserve human dignity and to work for the common good. This also means we collectively seek to influence the forces at work in society.

This is because we — individuals, families, workplaces, colleagues and organisations are confronted daily with not just the daily political briefings, media and hype, but also the real pain and devastation being felt by so many.

Unfortunately, but predictably, the worst impacts are being experienced disproportionately amongst the most vulnerable, those in insecure work, those in defined postcodes and those in institutional care. The blame game now under way is not helpful. We as a society need to address underlying causes and as concerned individuals and organisations, we need to find voice.

The proceedings of the Royal Commissions and Judicial and Ombudsman Inquiries are demonstrating the deep flaws in our federation, our public policy machinery and lack of accountability across multiple government agencies. In some cases, there is just straight out appalling lack of concern for the dignity of the individual and shared conviction of the common good.

On the other hand, we have seen some much needed responsive government funding interventions in supporting people with income, mental health and temporary housing support. These things however are short-term and only partially address the real problems. At this time when flaws in public policy and accountability are in the public spotlight, can society emerge from today's crises in better shape? Right now, the deep fractures in our society are being exposed and put under the microscope. There are threats and opportunities in this. In future years, writers may comment that the very fabric of the modern Australian society will have been forged in the crisis response and re-imagining of a more just, pluralistic and civil Australian society.

Hopefully we as a society can accept the need for truth and reconciliation with Indigenous Australians. Hopefully dignity and respect will be the cornerstones of how we care for the aged, disabled and other more vulnerable groups. Hopefully women and children will be safe in their own homes. This will require more determination and strength in the movement for social change. Clearly we also need to be more open to change, focused and organised.

And what of the Church?

For Catholic Social Services Victoria, our member organisations and the Church, NOW is the time of our relevance. NOW is the time for the extension of the desperately needed personal and family support services which Catholic social service organisations do so well with such a strong legacy. NOW is the time

for evidence-based, co-ordinated, policy and advocacy work. We also need to be open to change ourselves, to be transformed by the dynamics of our time. We can move forward in the Ignation approach of 'experience, reflection, action'.

Fired by the mission, we can focus on those areas of entrenched injustice, continue to emphasise our direct work for those who are poor and vulnerable whilst working towards public policies based on social justice and equity. At the same time we will benefit from continuing to work in solidarity and shared responsibility with other parts of the Church. We are open to change and seek collaboration, seeing ourselves as interconnected and more relevant than ever.

Right NOW is the time for Catholic social service organisations and the Church to be sufficiently organized, resourced and focused to have a relevant influence on the public policy and societal forces at work.

CSSV is at a pivotal point in time. NOW is the time for you to have your say. The Constitution is up for review, and the proportional share of funding has shifted towards increased member contributions. The Archbishop and Bishops acting together as the Province, have prompted a fundamental review of governance, structure and funding. CSSV Council and the Province, in agreement, have commenced a review. Fr Frank Brennan SJ will facilitate and prepare a directions paper. Fr Frank is well known to members and is outstanding in his capacity for such a task. He will welcome your contributions. The Terms of Reference of the review are attached. I have also attached our 2019 annual report for your reference.

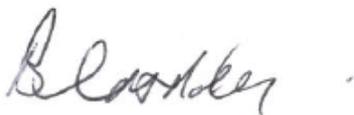
I urge your engagement in this review process as it will directly influence decisions to be made by the Archbishop and Bishops on the areas they will support in the future in terms of governance, structure and funding for CSSV. For Catholic social service organisations and the Church to have influence, we need a strong collective voice.

You can email Fr Frank directly at rector@newman.unimelb.edu.au to give him your thoughts. In addition, Josh Lourensz will also invite you to participate in one of two on-line focus groups in the near future.

Standing strong on our values and mission, let us continue to lead, engage and work for a better future. I quote the words of Chris Lowney which I think are apt for us now:

'Leaders imagine an inspiring future and strive to shape it rather than passively watching the future happen around them. Heroes extract gold from the opportunities at hand rather than waiting for golden opportunities to be handed to them'

Thank you for your commitment and solidarity.



Bernie Cronin
Chair, Catholic Social Services Victoria