

Church on the margins, our core mission

A statement from Catholic Social Services Victoria
following the First General Assembly of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia

As Melbourne readies itself to emerge from ‘the world’s longest lockdown’, there is much to be done, particularly for those among our communities that have been deeply impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lives and livelihoods have been lost, the need for social housing and rental support has greatly increased, as have the calls for assistance from those suffering from mental ill health, social isolation, job loss and family and domestic violence. Those who were already vulnerable and marginalised, are more so now, due to the compounding impact of the pandemic. It’s within this context, that Catholic Social Services Victoria and its members remain deeply committed to serving those who are most vulnerable and marginalised, and to calling out the political and social structures that entrench disadvantage.

‘Now is the time to strengthen the body of the Church in Australia as a mission-driven, outward-focussed people,’ says Bernie Cronin, Chair of Catholic Social Services Victoria. ‘We need to fully embrace the [recent words](#) of Pope Francis – to be active on the peripheries, to be with those who struggle, and to bring mercy.

‘Pope Francis regularly says that to be missionary is to be at the periphery and on the margins, which means we must be outwardly active, we must be among those who struggle and who are in need. This is the very essence of the experience of those working and volunteering within our agencies, and many of our parishes who are at the coal-face within their communities.

‘Each year, our 45 member organisations, with their 7,000 staff and 17,000 volunteers, touch the lives of 200,000 people who need help. Each encounter with someone in need is an opportunity to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who walked alongside those who were suffering, thousands of years ago. Today, we are that living sign of Jesus’ love, mercy and compassion.’

The [Fifth Plenary Council of Australia](#) has recently completed the first of two general assemblies, which saw 280 members – including bishops, priests, congregational leaders, lay men and women from across the country – discuss [16 agenda questions](#). These members will meet again in July 2022 to conclude the plenary process, and to present ‘a way forward’ for the Catholic Church in Australia.

Reflecting on the first assembly and some of the summaries given by the smaller working group representatives, Bernie says, ‘I was most struck by the report of Sabrina-Ann Stevens from North Queensland calling for recognition around the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which is a must and is one of CSSV’s core positions. It has been my strong view for some years that the Bishops of Australia and the broader Catholic community has a real opportunity to walk in solidarity with our Indigenous leaders and communities and to show leadership in supporting the call for truth-telling and justice.’

Bernie also reiterated the position of CSSV's Council as outlined in the [open letter to plenary council members](#) in early October, calling for the principles of Catholic Social Teaching to be acknowledged by Church leadership as central to the Church's mission, with a particular lens of 'justice and equity'. 'Essentially, the deeply embedded work of our agencies within the Australian community are very much about justice and equity. We are not only about providing individual charity to people, but we're seeking to address the underlying structural causes of disadvantage,' says Bernie.

'As stated in the letter, we take a lot of inspiration and guidance from St Mary MacKillop of the Cross who was very strong in her advocacy for justice. She really created a footprint for us to fully appreciate that our role is not just charity. Rather, charity and advocacy go hand in hand and that together, charity and advocacy provide hope.

'Here we have in Australia, particularly in Victoria, with its strong heritage of religious congregations and all of our members' staff and volunteers, we have an enormous wealth of experience and expertise in how to put Catholic Social Teaching into action, particularly within our Australian context.'

Adding to Bernie's sentiments, Executive Director of CSSV, Josh Lourensz, noted that one of the agenda questions asked, 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? How might we partner with others (Christians, people of other faiths, neighbourhood community groups, government) to do this?

Addressing this, Josh said, 'We need to listen and be a part of the reality of those impacted by inequality, abuse and disadvantage if we are to be the Church that truly brings good news. Catholic social services are one mechanism we have that actively works to do this.

'Catholic social and community services are places where, to a degree, struggle is shared. Spaces in which professional services operate, supported by volunteers, have the opportunity and privilege to be surrounded by the reality of struggle. Through partnership - often with Government(s), congregations, dioceses, parishes, and others in the community, social services are a place where people of faith and no faith work side by side with a focus on anyone who is disadvantaged or marginalised, or having a difficult time.

'Social services - the experiences of our members - allow the Church to speak with an informed and authentic voice into the systemic causes of injustice, a way of being in tune with the needs of those on the margins, and spaces that bring members of the Catholic Church together with people of other and no faith, to dialogue and work for the common good.'

Moving ahead toward the second assembly gathering in July 2022, Bernie says, 'There's no doubt that the Church needs to look deeply into itself, to reform itself and to overcome many deeply entrenched structural problems, but to fulfil its total ambit, we ask the plenary council members to have a forward and outward-looking agenda item or theme based on justice and equity.

'This is a crucial moment in the life of the Church in Australia,' he said. 'There's such an exciting and forward-looking opportunity for the Church, through the Plenary Council, to consider "How do we move ahead?" How can the Church use its collective activity to address structural causes of disadvantage, to enact the values of the Gospel, to assist others - meaning all people - to welcome the stranger, to walk his or her path, all of which are firmly rooted in the principles of Catholic Social Teaching. This is solidarity, the dignity of the human person, care for our earth and the common good, in action.'

Recommended Actions for the Plenary Council as it heads towards the second assembly in July 2022:

1. 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.
2. The 'Parish as Centre of Service' subsidiarity model can be more widely promoted by dioceses.
3. ACBC and Dioceses should express solidarity with Indigenous leadership in the movement towards truth telling, treaty and voice.
4. 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.
5. 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.
6. 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'.
7. 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.
8. Church leadership should ensure the sustainability of peak co-ordinating social service bodies at state and national levels.
9. 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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