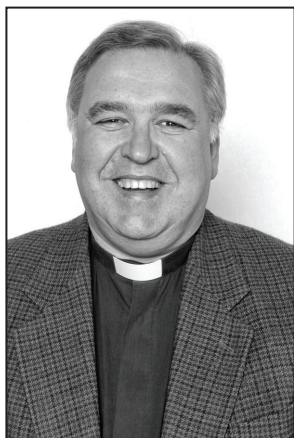


## The Reverend Canon Dr Ray Cleary AM



Ray Cleary has been a lifelong advocate on behalf of the most disadvantaged groups in society. In a career spanning 40 years, he was Assistant Superintendent of the Victorian School for Deaf Children (1971–74), Administrator and Deputy Director of Mercy Family Care (1975–77), Executive Director of Child Care Services for the Uniting Church and Copelen Street Family Centre (1977–85), Associate Director of the Mission of St James and St John (1985–87), Executive Director of

Anglican Homes for Elderly People (1987–92), Incumbent of St Paul's Anglican Church in Canterbury (1992–95), Chief Executive Officer of Melbourne City Mission (1995–2000), and Chief Executive Officer of Anglicare Victoria (2000–10). He was also Chair of the Inter-Church Gambling Taskforce (1996–2002), Chair of the Social Responsibilities Committee of the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne (1993–2010), and a member of the Board of the Brotherhood of St Laurence (1993–95). He has been a member of Archbishop-in-Council since 1993 and of the Chapter of St Paul's Cathedral since 1998. He was made a Life Member of the Children's Welfare Association of Victoria in 1987. In 2001, Ray chaired the Victorian Government's Ministerial Advisory Committee on Homelessness and subsequently joined the Ministerial Council on Housing and the Ministerial Council on Children and Families. From 2005–10, Ray was Chair of Anglicare Australia, the national network and peak body for Anglican welfare and justice. In 2007, he was appointed to the Victorian Children's Council. In 2008, he was elected to the International Forum on Child Welfare, a UN-sponsored organisation. Since September 2010, Ray has been Director of Ministry Formation at Trinity Theological School, University of Melbourne. Ray received a Centenary Medal in 2001 and in the Queen's Birthday Honours 2008 he became a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in recognition of his work in the area of community services and social justice.

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# Foreword

In the state of Victoria, the discovery of gold in 1851 was a landmark event that was to change the face of this state. The gold rush brought a cultural and social transformation to this state which is felt to this day. The churches at the time were bowled over by the dramatic impact that gold brought and struggled to keep up. But very quickly some Christian leaders including the first Anglican Bishop of Melbourne, Bishop Charles Perry, began to realise the importance of the church being at the forefront of helping those in need. Their motivation was driven by a particular theological model, but what Perry and others did was to lay the foundation for the emergence of Christian based welfare agencies.

Now, over one hundred and sixty years later the emergence of agencies that can trace their origins back to the gold era are with us in new and redefined ways. Anglicare Victoria, Uniting Care, Baptcare, and McKillop Family Services, just to name a few have a history of delivering care in Victoria since the mid nineteenth Century. At first, the agencies were very much under the direct control of the denominations that founded them, but by the latter part of the twentieth century many agencies previously with very direct church connections were either now quite separate or at least separately incorporated. The big dilemma then became, what the relationship was between the church and its welfare agencies?

At the same time, this relationship was being re-examined and redefined, Australian society was changing dramatically. Post war immigration, the advent of multiculturalism, the impact of technology, the strides in medicine, and the lead of education all served to transform Australia. Again, the church has grappled with this change and struggled to cope with it. Church attendance has declined, Sunday is no longer sacred, and Australia is a secular society. However, in this challenging context the Anglican Church has adopted a commitment to mission, which includes these points as goals for the church in all its various expressions:

To respond to human need by loving service.

To seek to transform the unjust structures of society.

To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

These goals clearly seek to bring together the church and its relationship to contemporary Australian society. God and people go together; they are inseparable and from their beginning, the church's welfare agencies have been at the forefront of this relationship.

Dr Ray Cleary, in this book tackles this relationship head on tracing the history of welfare development in Victoria with particular reference to the church based agencies. Indeed, for a great part of his professional career and ministry Dr Cleary has been a leader in the field. In this landmark book he brings together a richness of Biblical insight, Christian theology and practical experience in the field of welfare to enunciate a Community Theology model of how church and agency can work together to make a difference to our society and many of its members. Dr Cleary passionately believes the church through its welfare agencies can be a major part of the churches' strategy to reach people where they are and at the same time disclose a gracious and loving God.

This is a book to be read, discussed and debated in churches, agencies, theological colleges, government and other interest groups.

The Right Reverend Andrew W Curnow  
Anglican Bishop of Bendigo  
February 2012

# Preface

A number of my professional colleagues, past and present, have encouraged me to write this book. But it also arises out of my own sense and experience that after 40 years' practice in the community sector within a number of faith traditions, I may have something to offer today's church and church welfare practitioners and agencies about mission and the rightful place of justice as central to God's hopes and dreams for God's creation. Perhaps more significantly, I have written from my belief in the faith-based community sector itself, predominantly Christian but not exclusively, and the many people who have contributed to its growth since the first European settlement was established at Sydney Cove in 1788. Since then, faith-based community agencies have been at the cutting edge of both social policy and service delivery to many of the most disadvantaged and disenfranchised in Australian society.

This book is written from the perspective of someone who 'came up through the ranks' and who has been described as being 'willing to take his coat off and do what has to be done'. My own faith journey and personal experience informs it. I began my professional life as a secondary teacher, before moving into community welfare, caring first for children, then for the elderly and then as chief executive officer of two major Melbourne faith-based agencies, Melbourne Citymission and Anglicare Victoria. Since September 2010 I have joined the Trinity College Theological School in Melbourne as the Director of Ministry Formation and Sambell Lecturer in public and pastoral theology. In

between, I studied theology and was ordained an Anglican priest, a role I continue to fulfil alongside my welfare agency work, particularly through my duties as a canon, priest associate and most recently Acting Dean of St Paul's Cathedral in Melbourne. The realisation that God would not go away, despite my protestations, eventually led me towards my career as a social worker/priest, straddling both church and the broader welfare and community sector with a foot in both camps linking faith and community, an experience I cherish while recognising its challenges. In this work, I have entered the realm of theology in the public arena, an imperative for today's faith-based agencies.

My experience of God and the created order has come principally through listening to, and engaging with, people rather than from formal learning or study. Conversation and engaging with the complexities of human experience has been at the centre of my journey. From this engagement, I have reflected on the writings of theologians and leaders in other intellectual pursuits. Whether I have spoken with learned people or those who have experienced deep trauma in their life, I have seen that all are born with a God-given potential for fullness of life. Sadly, many have been disappointed, because their dreams and hopes have either been shattered or never fulfilled. In my work as a school teacher, I experienced young people uneasy with themselves often because they came from vulnerable families. Working with children in care led me to see that children without nurturing and caring adults in their lives, either as parents or mentors, are unlikely to aspire to better things. My engagement with many living on the margins has awakened me to the presence of the divine in what Jesus described as 'the least of [his] brothers and sisters'. Their contributions have enriched my experience, hopefully mine has theirs.

This is still the reality I experience despite my frustration and at times downright anger and disappointment with aspects of church, and particularly with church leadership which I believe regularly fails to listen, but rather seeks privilege for itself, moralising and judging often with a lack of compassion or justice, and failing to hear the

cries of those in need. It is the Gospel message, the unrestrained and unending generosity of God, and my commitment to God's justice which keeps me within the church, despite its institutional frailties and organisational flaws.

The community sector today is very different from when I began my journey and professional career with a lifelong commitment to the sector and to the children and families it professed to help. The role of agencies as service providers, researchers and advocates, while retaining these core activities, are now under threat from the increasing intrusion of government-funded programs and greater government regulation, outcome measurements, monitoring and control. In addition the sector is challenged by values and expressions of service which, in the past, its leading practitioners would have rejected. Australia's current treatment of asylum seekers and 'boat people' is an example of a divergence of view and response by the Federal Government who advocate the processing of their refugee status offshore while the church agencies are demanding greater compassion and support for onshore processing. There is also the danger that a culture of innovation, resilience and commitment to people and their needs will be replaced by one of regulation and compliance as risk management becomes a key governance requirement. The value base of many agencies, enshrined in values of justice and compassion have also been seen to be absent or wanting in the care of children in institutions, as evidenced by the recent apologies to the 'Stolen Generations' and the 'Forgotten Australians'.

The Anglican Church's tradition of connection to and engagement with society, which has remained a central focus of my ministry and work in the sector, provides a theological, philosophical, practical framework and guide for my dual role. The church has provided relief and sanctuary throughout its existence. This provision reflects the key parables of Jesus, stories that illustrate the generosity of God's hospitality to the lonely, the sick, the abused, the exploited, the hungry and the homeless. Likewise, inspiration has come from the Old Testament prophets' lament and call for renewal of the people of Israel, and their

demand that the religious and political leaders return to the principles of God's justice by caring for the orphaned and widowed.

In particular, the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son along with the Gospel accounts of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, have offered guidance and inspiration in my own practice of discipleship. They still provide guidance and inspiration. Every time I read Scripture I discern new insights and hope from the disturbing spirit of God in our times. Add to this a generosity expressed by Jesus to all who connected with him, and the Christian Gospel remains a poignant promise of hope.

The post-modern world continues to challenge the role of religious faith in shaping and informing the values and beliefs of an ever increasing secular society in Australia. Church attendance continues to decline, with some exceptions, across the nation. Around 70 per cent of Australians say they believe in God, although earlier figures may have been higher due to social factors and the option not offered to decline belief. While church attendances fall and the Australian media has abandoned its protection of religion and its associated welfare work, there is a strong argument to be mounted that in the area of welfare provision and education, faith-based and church welfare agencies are playing a stronger and more vocal and influential role across the nation.<sup>1</sup> There is also strong evidence that the Australian community at large values and supports the church's commitment to the promotion of justice in our community life.

Across the world, governments of all political persuasions, despite aggressive secular and humanist agendas challenging the place and role of religion in society, are looking to the churches and their agencies not only to provide services but to advocate with and on behalf of their clients. While the media reports that anti-religious sentiment is on the increase, at the same time religious and faith issues in matters of justice remain high.

This book is offered as a way forward for faith-based agencies in their ministry to all in need at this time in Australia's history. It reflects



a belief in the generosity and hospitality of God and the divine preference or concern for all those who society and the churches view as outsiders. It builds on early welfare beginnings to the transformation now taking place in many agencies. My argument is simply that one cannot love God without loving one's neighbour. It recognises that on many occasions in the past and in the present, churches and their agencies may be their own worst enemies by denying God's generosity, by their reading of scripture and lack of compassion and tolerance of those who hold different views or beliefs.

The book is not about prescriptive moral values, let alone judgemental of sinners. It is about responding to the needs and challenges of today by using the model of theological reflection. My response is simple - listening to the cries and distress of those in need is a more appropriate response than moralising or making demands on people. My hope is that this book may provide a framework for renewal and growth in faith-based responses to the needs of people today. It is written for both the large agency and the local parish response, for both the paid professional and the volunteer.

The Gospels portray Jesus as a great listener - a great listener to God and to the cries of the poor. What better example from Scripture than Matthew 25, where Jesus tells his listeners that whenever they extend hospitality and care to those in need, they extend it to him. Over my 40 years in ministry I have listened to the words, the hurts, the cries of homeless young people; adults abused in care; newly arrived migrants; single parents; frail elderly people; and many others.

I have been ministered to by many of them and have seen the face of God in each of them. Listening to their pain, engaging with their experience, and allowing oneself to be with them, is a life transforming experience.

Throughout my ministry I have had the opportunity of working with both Christian and other faith traditions. This has given me a broad and eclectic opportunity to view how others translate their faith into action. In a similar way, serving on a number of boards of

community service organisations, government committees and reviews, I have had the opportunity to explore and engage with the interface of public policy, theology and mission in the post modern context and the challenges faced in maintaining a Christ-centred approach. This remains a continuing challenge. Hopefully those in church leadership positions will find value in this book, encouraging them to listen and to embrace the agencies in their overall mission strategy as faithful agents of God's love.

But above all, this book is primarily about hope: the hope God offers to all people and especially to those on the edge. Hope should be, I believe, central to the ministry of any agency or individual.

#### **ENDNOTES**

1. The recent announcement by a consortium of welfare agencies including the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Mission Australia and the Benevolent Society to form a new company to deliver child care services formerly provided by ABC Learning is an example. Likewise a newspaper poll published in *The Age* prior to Christmas 2009 suggested while church attendance continues to decline, Australians still have an interest in the divine and the search for God.

# Introduction

You who fatten yourselves and enjoy your ease. You who drink well into the night, and then cover yourselves with soft blankets ... you dare demand a strict account for the needy who is little more than a corpse, and you fear not the account you will have to render before the court of Christ, terrible and frightful. If the poor fake, it is out of need that they fake, for it is your merciless inhumanity and your cruelty that forces them to do so. <sup>1</sup>

In Australia as in many other western societies, including the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Germany and the Scandinavian countries, the provision of welfare services and social security support and assistance is under the microscope. In some cases there have been hostile attempts by governments of all political persuasions to dismantle programs and lower benefits for those in need. This has occurred globally as governments have embraced market economics at the expense of the mixed economy, using the argument that welfare support creates dependency. In the days following the global economic crises of 2009 and 2011, housing, education, health and welfare programs have been placed at further risk as governments seek solutions to the collapse of the financial system. In some places financial bailouts of industry and banks in countries such as Greece and Ireland have been at the cost of social and community programs, and although economic stability has

improved, many countries are still and will continue to struggle with a breakdown in social cohesion and a growth in disadvantage.

Many of the changes have been driven by social and economic goals which seek to diminish the view that government and the community have the responsibility to provide and support those in need out of a strong commitment to and belief in a just and compassionate community. In its place the principles of personal choice and responsibility have been elevated with a greater emphasis being placed on the individual to provide for themselves. This growing shift in public policy is a particular challenge to church welfare agencies striving to be faithful to their Christ-given commission to minister to those in need, although the recent global economic crisis and the failure of the market to lift people out of poverty is having a sobering effect on this conservative ideology and both Federal and State Governments have recognised the important role agencies have played supporting families throughout the crisis.<sup>2</sup> New models of ministry however will still be an imperative and will require shifts in thinking about the role of church welfare agencies, as it will no doubt for the whole community sector. In this new environment the challenge is to remain faithful to Christian principles while meeting the emerging demands of government and the needs of the community. This book is timely in the current global financial crisis because the values of Christian faith which have driven the market economy should be revisited to assess how they have been part of, and contributed to, the current preoccupation with economic growth at all costs.

From my wide experience in ministry in the church, community and welfare sector, I believe that church welfare agencies need to reinvent themselves in today's context and find new ways of engaging in the public arena while retaining their commitment to the Gospel message of hope and justice. Building on the strengths and contribution the agencies of the church have made in the past, it is time to think afresh in contemporary Australia.

First and foremost, ministry is about embracing service and the principles of social justice as expounded by the Old Testament prophets and the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. In particular, the church welfare agency is an arm of Christian ministry (a legitimate and central part and expression of the mission of the church) serving the poor, the alienated and the outsider fulfilling the two great commandments, to love God and to love one's neighbour.<sup>3</sup> This affirms that belief in the Christian God cannot be understood without unconditional love for the neighbour. Further, such a belief is at the heart of the Christian doctrine of God as compassionate, generous, forgiving and just and covers all expressions of theology. A commitment to justice is central to the building of the Kingdom of God's love and presence. It is not an optional extra, nor is about some future afterlife paradise.

Many church welfare agencies across Australia began as charitable or public benevolent institutions. Many began as parish outreach programs, such as the St James Ladies Benevolent Society in Melbourne, providing food relief and temporary shelter. In this book, the term church welfare agency will be used to describe organisations which have a legal and constitutional link to the church and identify themselves with the church's mission. They are often described as faith based agencies. Throughout this book the term is interchangeable. The extent to which this link is acknowledged by agency and church, however, varies and relationships between both are sometimes uncertain. To that end, the ministry of service as expressed by church welfare agencies is as important as evangelism in the mission task and their activities have influenced not only the practice of service but also the formulation and direction of social and economic policy.

Evangelism, like service, is one of the three core elements of mission. The third element is worship and praise. Taken together, they fulfil the missionary task. Any separation or division is artificial and has often been employed to emphasise a form of mission rather than its complete expression.

The mission of the church, therefore, is threefold; proclaiming the good news of the Gospel; praise and worship of God as Creator and source of all being; and service, living out in one's daily life the call to faithful discipleship. Each is connected to the other. As David Bosch says:

Christian mission gives expression to the dynamic relationship between God and the world, particularly as this was portrayed first, in the story of the covenant people of Israel and then, supremely, in the birth, life death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.<sup>4</sup>

The constant challenge throughout my ministry has been to ensure the ongoing connectedness between Christian theology with the lives of men, women and children who find themselves outside, and on the edge of, community life. They have often been described as the 'different, dissident or difficult'. Many who live in poverty, have a disability, or have experienced neglect or abuse. Many lives are affected by factors outside their control, such as a lack of employment opportunities or mental health issues, a reality often ignored by critics of government-sponsored programs, and by advocates for the free market as the best option to address disadvantage. In this scenario, the community sector's role in the market place is to pick up the pieces when it fails.

What follows is the challenge for all who work within a Christian theological framework to discern God's mission for the times, to name and affirm the divine experience in the justice and welfare obligations of the church, sustained by a belief in the community of God, both here and yet to come. This is to recognise the disturbing spirit for our times in this post Christian context. This also implies that the sacred and secular cannot be separated, and that a major responsibility of a church welfare agency is to provide high quality support service, as well as to seek to transform the individual and society for the common good.

The search for spirituality and justice in Australia is alive and well, and the church welfare agency has a role in grounding this search within the Christian faith tradition. This is more than a recruitment

to a faith brand, but a journey addressing questions of meaning, identity and purpose.

In this context, the church agency is a sojourner and wanderer, searching for the promises and presence of God in a broken and fragile world. Here the journey is as important as the destination. In the current global economic downturn the capacity of the market alone to eradicate poverty without the active engagement of government and the community sector has been laid bare and the challenge for church-based agencies is to re-engage their work in this changing environment. This is an emerging mission agenda and requires a rethinking of the welfare and justice role for churches.

This book begins with a reflection on the development of welfare and welfare initiatives within the broader Christian community. It then looks at church welfare work, examining in particular influences and challenges which have impacted on the work of both the church and its agencies in responding to human need. This centres on the place of theology in a Christian rationale for church engagement in the delivery of services to the most disadvantaged. It is followed by an examination of Luke's Gospel, highlighting the principles of an agenda for social justice found in his writings.

From this point the book moves from an analysis of the historical welfare obligation of the church to a more engaging social justice agenda, embodying the place of hope in the building of the Kingdom of God. The model of community theology is then discussed, with details for the implementation of the model for a modern faith based community service organisation. I conclude with a series of recommendations for action by current faith based organisations to ensure their ministry continues to thrive in the days ahead.

#### ENDNOTES

1. John Chrysostom, 4th century Archbishop of Constantinople.
2. The Rudd Government elected in November 2007 has provided significant additional financial support to faith based agencies since November 2008 to sustain existing programs and to help agencies respond to the Global Financial Crisis.
3. For the purposes of this book references to 'the Church' meaning the Christian community will use capital C, while use of 'church' as a generic noun or adjective will use lower case.
4. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Technology of Mission*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1991, p. 9.





# I     **Role of the church in welfare work**

The church is the living body, created by Jesus Christ and entrusted with the promise of God to bring all men and women into a living and loving relationship with God's self. It has a long and rich tradition of caring for those in need and sharing the Good News of Christian faith. From the stories of Jesus, the parables and his engagement with the sick, outcast and different, through the monastic tradition of hospitality and generosity, to the provision of orphanages, aged care and hospitals and to today's welfare activities, the church, in its differing forms and traditions, has responded to human need, offering not only sustenance, but hope.

This ministry of hope and generosity is now under the microscope, brought about by changes in society itself, past practices of abuse within the church, emerging community needs and changing government policies.

In Australia as in other parts of the Western world Christian faith and belief appears in decline. Faith has not been so much abandoned as off the radar screen and apparently irrelevant to the modern

world. Many people have slipped unconsciously into the acceptance of Western secularism while even those of faith accept the opportunities and freedoms provided by our social democracy. Yet there is a paradox here. While belief is in decline, the role of church or faith based agencies remains strong if not stronger and governments of all political persuasions continue to outsource services to these agencies. At a summit held in Canberra in November 2008 the major church welfare providers in seeking to address the demands for service during the economic downturn of that year were addressed by a number of senior government ministers and their concerns heard. The sector provides over 60 per cent of the community work across Australia. As a result significant funds were made available to agencies to support families at the coalface during times of financial stress.

The challenge for the church in addressing human need in times of economic stress or downturn is to remain faithful to its core activity of proclaiming God's generosity and hospitality in an increasingly secular and multi-faith society. Further the demands of government to deliver prescribed programs and changing community needs are additional challenges. A number of government program initiatives may not be in line with Gospel values. Policies introduced by the Howard Government (1996–2007) and by the Gillard Government in 2011 are a case in point. Decisions to require people on a disability pension to work additional hours per week, in spite of research reports highlighting the difficulties this may cause employers, is one example of such policies. Alongside this imperative sits the mandate to pursue justice and human rights for all Australians and for church welfare leaders to exercise their democratic right to speak in the public forum on these matters.

Many people in Australia today have no history of involvement with the church with others at least two, if not three generations away from any church engagement. The popular portrayal often portrayed of the church is of a monochrome, monolithic structure, lacking diversity

not listening or engaging with a variety of approaches in undertaking its mission. In reality, 'the church' is, in fact, many churches.

The mission of the church, in all its forms, reflects the essence of the two great commandments to be found in the teaching of Jesus: to love God and to love one's neighbour.<sup>1</sup> The fulfilment of both commandments is essential to the Christian lifestyle and commitment.

Church may mean a building or a gathering of a local group of Christians into a fellowship or association where certain beliefs are accepted as central to the identity of those who belong. The word 'church' is also used loosely to describe a denomination or ecclesiastical structure.

Common discourse includes references to the Anglican Church or the Uniting Church, the Salvation Army, the (Roman) Catholic or the Churches of Christ. Each has its own structure, different approaches to authority and ordering of its life.

To understand what these bodies each mean by calling themselves 'church', it is necessary to observe what each do and say about themselves. Liturgy or worship is central to the life of each denomination and faith community. When a congregation or community gathers, for worship, 'they read and expound sacred books, they offer prayers and praise; they initiate members by a ritual of washing; they solemnly celebrate a sacred meal.'<sup>2</sup> These are the essential characteristics of the church.

The source of this action is what Christians call God. Christianity understands God as three persons; Father, Son and Spirit. In alternative and more inclusive language, God is described as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. The church is the living body, created by Jesus Christ and entrusted with the promise of God to bring all men and women into a living and loving relationship with God's self.

The mission task of the church is described and expressed in different ways and with varying degrees of emphasis, depending upon the place, time and activities undertaken. In the first instance, Jesus Christ is the foundation and centre of the church's confessional life and the mission task or obligation. The Christian claim is that in the person of



Jesus Christ, God dwells among the creation (past, present and future). Belief and commitment to this faith perspective is expressed in how individuals live in relationship to others, to God and to the whole of creation. The building of Christian faith or community embraces a vision of creation and renewal as opportunities for both personal and social transformation.

The church is called to participate in the mission of Christ by joining with him in the great act of reconciliation, God with humanity and humanity with itself. In the Acts of the Apostles, the writer tells of the early church and its disciples constantly trying to discern and catch up with what God was doing.<sup>3</sup> Often the assumption is that this was easily discerned at the time and that the followers were a homogenous group. Such a view is far from the church's experience.

Throughout the history of the church's life the challenge has been, and continues to be, the recognition of God's continuing self revelation and presence, and the manner by which both individual Christians and the church should respond to this claim.

Central to this introduction is to recognise the many challenges churches face today in the areas of dogma, moral teaching and practice. In the post modern context the accepted authority of institutions such as the church is now openly and more critically challenged as being the source of moral authority. Its voice is seen as one among many. To recognise the presence of the divine in the outcast and disadvantaged, as attested to by Matthew in his account of the final judgement only has relevance to those who believe. It is not a mandate for others.<sup>4</sup>

Currently in Australia similar and yet different circumstances from those of the early church challenge faith communities. Like the early church, faith communities are a diverse group. Class distinction and inequality continue to exist and the gap between the haves and have-nots, is a reminder to us all of our failures and the inequalities which still exist in all parts of the world. A theocentric view of existence is increasingly rejected and the responses of the churches to this challenge has so far only achieved minimal results.

The challenge is to discover and understand where, and how, God is present today and the role to be played by the church and its agencies. The task constantly before the church, and therefore the welfare agencies, is to keep their eye and focus on God's agenda in mission and not blinded by their own. Further, the challenge is not to be seduced or co-opted into agenda contrary to the spirit of the Gospel. All this is disturbing to some but the Gospel has always been risky business.

Central to the mission of the church is the outpouring of God's love for the whole of creation. It is to be seen in the life of a faith community, the local parish and in the expressions and activities of agencies. It is to be built upon the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the ultimate sign of God's love and generosity.

This understanding is to be seen in the mission statement of Anglicare Victoria and similar agencies: 'The Agency exists to create a more just society by expressing God's love through service, education and advocacy'. The Agency's Strategic Plan entitled 'Strategic Directions 2008–2010' has as its motto, 'Supporting families, building community today'. Service is understood as mission in action sharing in the generosity and hospitality of God for the other.

Christian faith may be expressed in many ways. The central doctrines or foundations of Christian faith are contained in the ancient creeds of the church. Interpretation of these doctrines and creeds varies among the branches of the Christian Church and has led, and still leads to regular controversy and debate both within and beyond these communities. Central to Christian faith is belief in Jesus as Son of God, who died and rose to new life. In this new life, hope is proclaimed and a vision of God's Kingdom affirmed. Jesus is the Messiah, the bearer of God's grace and justice. This Jesus is alive today in the lives of men and women of faith and goodwill. He is incarnate in, and alongside, all of creation.

Faith is deeper and more personal than religion. Faith provides a focus for the way an individual acts in the world. A faith perspective provides a way of viewing and seeing issues of everyday life. Christian

faith points to Jesus Christ, the crucified, risen and expected Lord. In Jesus Christ, God reveals himself and his purpose in the world.

The recognition of the resurrection of Jesus is not to be understood as the resuscitation of a corpse, but the realisation that the tomb was empty, that truth could not be hidden in the grave and that his death was not in vain.

Acceptance of this claim provides a rationale and focus for pursuing a mission agenda which affirms the ongoing presence of Jesus in the world. It allows organisations to embrace Isaiah's vision, retold in Luke 4:16, as the vision for church welfare agencies. Affirmed in the resurrection of Jesus is the ongoing struggle for justice. Participation in this mission of justice means a sharing in the meaning of resurrection today.

Many Christians understand and express their belief in Jesus in a personal way, as an individual spiritual encounter. Others broaden their belief to include a mandate and commitment to public witness in every aspect of living to God's justice, seeking to find God in the poor, the suffering and the outcast. This latter view has been a driving force for the involvement of many Christians in welfare today. It was the motivation for the establishment of many local justice and welfare initiatives in past years and remains so now.

Previously, these beginnings were often understood as charity, undertaking acts of good will and benevolence. Charity towards those in need was understood as an individual's responsibility to those down on their luck or who had fallen on hard times, often due to poor personal choices. Charity involved helping those 'less fortunate'. In more recent times the commitment to charity has been broadened to engage the principles of social justice.

Today's church welfare response and agenda is therefore broader and seeks to address more than emergency relief and handouts. A justice approach involves not only meeting immediate needs, but also addressing the causes. It stands in contrast to a charity model embracing research, education and advocacy.

A faith understanding and perspective is at the very heart of Christianity and an essential part in defining a role for a church welfare agency. A faith perspective calls for a relationship with the Divine, a partnership in building a community which reflects the very nature of God's love.

A faith perspective recognises and affirms that the cosmos, creation, life itself was inspired and brought into being by a source, a power greater than all – God. Such a faith perspective and world view requires an active human response to God, lived out in service to others. Further, it acknowledges the willingness of God, as evident in the death and resurrection of Jesus, to share in partnership with human beings in the challenge and call to build a community of love; a just and compassionate society.

Jesus embodies inspiration and hope for Christians. He is the celebrated light of the world and provides the means by which Christians understand their relationship with God. In Jesus, God's agenda is set out. His story provides the framework for the mission of the church welfare agency. How this role or mission is expressed, and how the Jesus story is understood is an essential part in identifying a distinctive Christian contribution by agencies. God's compassion and concern for the poor and outcast, as spoken to by the prophets and in the ministry of Jesus helps define a distinctive Christian contribution embodying the ethic of love and reflecting the Creator's unconditional love for all. Language, or the use of it, and different emphasis in mission are present across the sector and this contributes to a rich diversity and tapestry of expression and engagement in the task of service.

Christian faith provides a response to, and framework for, addressing the great questions of life which give meaning and purpose to human existence. A faith approach involves asking questions of life and death, pushing boundaries on ethical issues and risk-taking in areas of justice, mercy, righteousness and compassion. Faith provides a focus and a reason for active commitment to develop relationships both with God and with all aspects of creation. Like the church itself agencies are



not monolithic or the same in expression. They engage in their tasks differently, yet always with conviction, compassion and commitment.

At the beginning of the new millennium, many church welfare agencies find themselves living in a state of ambivalence, unsure of both their identity and future. The present lack of certainty is not new. The history of church welfare in Victoria shows there has always been a degree of ambivalence within and between agencies concerning their mission and role. The cause of this ambivalence has been the church welfare agency's relationship with the church. In part, this has been due to the ongoing tension mentioned earlier on the meaning of mission while on other occasions the tensions have been maintained by those who lead the agencies. Many in leadership positions within agencies have failed to name the narrative that stands at the centre of their organisation separating it from their service delivery and actions. The ongoing debates producing this tension have widened the gap between the agencies and their church synods or governing authorities. Interestingly, in more conservative church circles, the realignment of a ministry of justice and service has reappeared with evangelism defined primarily as 'bringing people to Christ'. Jim Wallis of the Sojourners movement in the United States expresses this in this way:

My experience is that the more deeply one moves into the struggle for social justice, the more important personal faith becomes.<sup>5</sup>

The employment of professional staff, often with differing belief systems, has further contributed to the widening gap between church and agency as well as the agency's need for legal protection in an increasingly litigious environment.

The need for legal protection has meant that many church welfare agencies have become incorporated bodies and face increasing requirements to abide by Federal and State government law. In some instances this process has had the effect of widening the gap between agency and churches. Over the past twenty years, workplace reform has occurred

in agencies embracing equal opportunity, award payments and anti discrimination laws. The church is only now responding to community expectations on these issues often with high levels of pain and in some instances resistance.

As agencies have increasingly employed staff for whom a Christian faith perspective is not predominant, and as governments have continued to seek to set the agenda for the church welfare agencies, mainly through substantial funding, the task of maintaining a strong Christian focus has become more difficult and challenging for agencies. Here the suggestion is not that church welfare agencies should only employ people of Christian faith. The church does not have a monopoly on goodness and God is not confined to the church. Nor should agencies be exempt from anti-discrimination legislation because it is church or a faith based agency. There is a great deal of confusion about this as welfare agencies are generally not religious bodies but rather a 'Public Benevolent Institution' under legislation. The church cannot claim privilege for itself while denying it to others. If church agencies wish to retain their identity and distinctive ministry, they need to have healthy working relationships and connections to the body they are part of, namely, the church while recognising at the same time they are part of the broader community sector.

Agencies like the Melbourne Citymission, modelled on both the Glasgow and the London Citymissions, established themselves in part as a response to the perceived failure of the city churches of Melbourne to respond to poverty and homelessness in the mid nineteenth century. Other Citymissions were created elsewhere for similar reasons. In their earlier existence, the Citymissions saw themselves as pseudo or para churches. They were seen by their founders as agencies of faith. People of faith, but outside of direct church control established many other agencies.

Increasingly, agencies such as Anglicare, St Vincent de Paul, and Uniting Care, are redefining their church connections in a way which enables them to be a voice to both church and community. Part of this

journey has been the rediscovery of their roots and mission as agents of the wider church. It has also meant that the church has needed to rediscover and own its agencies although this may not always be a comfortable or silent partnership. Increasingly agencies are using theological and biblical language to describe their mission and also as a means of creating a separate identity for themselves.

In addressing a distinctive Christian role for agencies today, dialogue and discussion with those of differing faith perspectives, or those with none, is also essential. However, within these discussions, the Christian contribution should be preserved and articulated if a distinctive Christian understanding is to be maintained.

Kenneth Leech says:

All genuine living theology is rooted in a profound, and at the end of the day, ineffable experience of the mystery that enfolds and transcends all being, the mystery that, in fear and trembling, we call God.<sup>6</sup>

The central determining theme in defining a future welfare role for the branches of the church and its agencies will be to ask the question, in whose service are we to engage in mission? From experience it is often easier to work with agencies not affiliated with the church than it is to work with some sections of the church. This surfaced during discussion and the diverse responses to the proposed Australian Human Rights Charter initiated by the Federal Government in 2009, when the Australian Christian Lobby representing pentecostal and evangelical churches expressed strong and assertive opposition to it, supported by Cardinal George Pell. This is not to say the Roman Catholic Church in Australia has uniformly taken the same line. There is no one uniform church response, while many agencies have been supportive of the Charter. On the other side, the Public Affairs Commission of the General Synod of the Anglican Church supported the Charter's intention to protect human rights.

The relationship between the words mission and evangelism has been a continuing debate within the life of many church welfare agencies. Differing positions on how scripture is read and interpreted have been influenced by denominational understandings of Christology and ecclesiology not to mention church politics.

Central to the mission of the church in a post Christian, multi-cultural and multi-faith Australia is the challenge to engage the hearts and minds of the Australian people. This goal should be central to church and agency. Although the church is no longer necessarily held in the high esteem it once was, and fails to connect with the majority of the Australian people in a meaningful and relevant way, there is still an expectation by significant sections of the community that it should be relevant and have something to say on many of the issues confronting our society. This can be seen on national or civic occasions and when tragedy such as the Port Arthur massacre (1996), the Bali bombings (2002) and the Victorian bushfires in 2009 occurred. The January 2011 floods in Queensland saw the agencies of the church at the forefront of relief efforts working alongside and with all people of goodwill.

This expectation of the role of the church as civic religion continues while, increasingly, in Western society the spiritual and the divine is questioned and the institutional church marginalised. The claim is regularly stated that humankind has the capacity to choose its own future without the imprimatur of a divine authority. More recently the current global economic challenges have sparked a renewed interest and engagement by church welfare leaders in the ideology of market economics<sup>7</sup> and a call to rethink the drivers of the global economic agenda. Likewise a similar resurgence in faith has emerged in some places, is grounded in the principles of biblical justice and being of the very essence of God.

Christians believe the divine presence is revealed in Jesus Christ, and the Bible is the source and authority for belief. Jesus, in his life, death and resurrection, is living witness to the divine command to create a community of justice, embodying the values of inclusiveness,

compassion, forgiveness and hope. Integral to the church's mission, therefore, is the call to build a just community as the embodiment of God's love for creation. Evidence for this task is to be found throughout Scripture and the emphasis on service central to the call of Jesus, to love one another as he loved us. Service is the embodiment of divine love and the fulfilling of God's justice.

A ministry of justice complements proclamation and adoration and is integral to the mission of the church and its welfare and justice obligation. One cannot love God without caring for, and loving, one's neighbour. The parables of Jesus remind us of this stark truth. Proclamation means giving witness to God's love by acts of service, narrative and advocacy, including research. Adoration is to be expressed through prayer and gathering for Eucharist.

A ministry of justice respects the integrity of God's creation and the dignity of the human person. A justice agenda includes listening to the cries and hurts of the people and responding to them with the generosity of God, is a reminder that the church's mission is not about its own power and status, but rather the empowerment of others to choose God.

The church can choose to proclaim the Good News to those on the outside, assisting prisoners, giving sight to the blind, alleviating the pain and suffering of the addict, the single parent or homeless young person. Or it can respond by focusing on keeping churches clean and pure, ignoring economic justice and holding on to views which bind up God's love with rules and dogma, thereby excluding the dissident, the difficult and the different.

The church is called to participate in Christ's mission in living out the grace of God in word and deed.

The present times pose many challenges. The message of the Gospel is one of hope. A great deal of the church's mission, including that of welfare agencies in the future will be to keep alive the flame of hope and the promise of a future in the context of great turmoil, unease and anguish. It will only do this when it embraces a more open and

transparent approach in its own life and recognise that the gift it has is one of moral persuasion and not demand. Church welfare agencies are part of this tradition, and likewise, their mission is to proclaim the generosity and hospitality of God in their witness of service to all in need. A mission enmeshed in God's compassion and justice should be integral to the agency's role and today address and engage with the health of the planet, the plight of the poor, the rise of terrorism and global conflict and the search for individual and common meaning.

A faith perspective enshrined in the Christian narrative of redemption and a deep longing for communion with the divine offers hope from the vulnerable and disadvantaged and is a reflection of God's integrity and faithfulness. A future, reframed welfare and justice ministry has this commitment at its core.

## ENDNOTES

1. The full Ten Commandments are to be found in Deuteronomy 5:7–21. Traditionally they are known as the 'Decalogue'. The summary of the two great commandments of which the above sentence is a paraphrase is to be found in Matthew 22:36–40.
2. InterAnglican Theological and Doctrine Commission, *For the Sake of the Kingdom, God's Church and the New Creation*, Published for the Anglican Consultative Council, London, 1986, p. 19.
3. Acts is the fifth book of the New Testament and speaks about the early Christian community.
4. See Matthew 25:31–46.
5. Jim Wallis, *The Great Awakening*, HarperOne, New York, 2008, p. 20.
6. K Leech, *The Sky is Red – Discerning the Signs of the Times*, Darton Longman and Todd, London, 1998, p. 46.
7. Various Christian writers and leaders across the globe have focussed on the need for a renewed economic ethic. See the writings of Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, on this matter during 2009.