



Catholic Identity and Culture in Catholic Community Service Organisations: The Next Steps

John Honner
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Introduction

This paper continues the Esther's Voice conversation on 'Spirituality and Human Services' and 'Catholic Identity and Culture in Catholic Community Service Organisations'. The focus of this paper is on making the ideas in the first two papers operational. Two key questions guide this paper:

1. How do we include staff and boards in these conversations?
2. How do we operationalise 'Catholic culture and identity' in our own organisations?

Before exploring these questions, a summary of the findings from the previous papers will establish our starting point.

In the discussion of 'Spirituality and Human Services' there was clear evidence that:

1. There is room in the public spaces of the Secular State for faith-based community service organisations.
2. Faith-based community service organisations should participate in and contribute to the development of emerging models of society growing out of the Secular State.
3. The recognition of spiritual needs, and attending to spiritual needs, is and should be part of professional standards and included in the State's provision of community services.

In the discussion of Catholic Culture and Identity in Catholic Community Service Organisations', it was argued that the concepts of 'mission' and

¹ Jointly auspiced by Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service, Jesuit Social Services, and MacKillop Family Services, *Esther's Voice* has been created as a site for the collaborative work of reflection, enquiry and action based on a commitment to the principles of Catholic Social Teaching. See www.esthersvoice.org.au.

'vision' are both normative and operative. In other words, they may set parameters, but essentially they encourage new journeys. Catholic culture and identity, therefore, are to be created rather than to be held on to. Their creation comes through four stages:

1. keeping alive the memories of our founders
2. continuing a dialogue with other elements in the Church about the Christian mission and our part in it
3. getting on with our work and our way of working: professional and compassionate, but also prophetic and loving, promoting hope and seeking justice
4. learning a new language and new rituals in partnership with those who work with us and those we work with.

1. How do we Include Staff and Boards in these Conversations?

Before answering this question, two points should be made. First, all good communication with people depends, among other things, on knowing the answer to key questions:

- How do these people best learn: by reason/ narrative / imagination/ reading/ listening/ talking/ doing/ other.... ?
- What is it that people want to know/ don't want to know?

Staff and Boards will usually present quite different profiles in answer to these questions, and so different styles of communication will be necessary.

Secondly, our question assumes that staff are to be included in conversations about identity and culture. This is important, because in some faith-based organisations the preservation and development of culture and identity are seen as the responsibility of the Board, and staff are simply employed to perform works as directed. Such an approach, while easy to manage, confines the Spirit and constrains the quality of any services.

1.1 Staff

Typically in any organisation around 30% of staff are keen, committed, and identify with the organisation; another 30% are happy in their work, but could equally happily move to another organisation; and another 30% will be restless in their work.

Again, in a faith-based organisation, we can expect around 30% of staff to share the faith commitment of the organisation; another 30% to be interested in aspects of the culture and happy to work in the organisation; and another 30% to be interested in the work, but uninterested in the faith-based identity.

Any strategy to include staff in conversations about the Catholic Identity and Culture of an organisation should respect these differences and aim to communicate with all parties.

First, and most important for staff, is what happens in the ordinary workings of an organisation. For example, staff want an organisation that

- is both professional and personal
- is participatory rather more than prescriptive
- encourages a good work-place community
- has a spirit of inclusion, hope, and recognition
- is successful and moving forward.

The real day-to-day culture of an organisation is evident in these elements. The 'myth'² of the culture is unnamed, but pervasive. To pick up Bishop Greg O'Kelly's words: 'the world is a theatre of God's presence, and the secular is the place of the incarnation'. So also the workplace is a theatre of God's presence and the place where the Spirit moves. In other words, we are including staff in conversations about Catholic culture as soon as they enter the workplace.

Secondly, myths and cultures are strengthened by specific stories and symbols, by particular language and rituals. Staff should be welcomed into the myth and culture of their organization, and then continually reminded of this myth in ways that inspire and guide. The welcome into the myth normally takes place at induction: this is often done badly, but it can also be done effectively. Good narrative is the best pathway in. The continual reminder of the myth comes through signage/ imagery/ logo/ motto, and also through particular training days and events.

Thirdly, an organisation needs to be clear, concise and consistent about its stories/ symbols/ language/ rituals. When organisations revise these key cultural elements, staff should be included as much as possible, with active as well as passive voice.

For further suggestions, see section 2 below on Operationalising Catholic Culture and Identity.

1.2 Boards

According to the Australian Business Excellence Framework, good governance is a key element in any excellent organisation. And, more to the point, a vision and mission that can be shared and communicated is key to good governance. If this is so, then appreciating the trajectory of Catholic Culture and Identity is a major responsibility of the Boards of Catholic

² 'Myth' here is not used in a negative or pejorative sense, but rather, as an abiding core narrative which reveals identity, purpose, character, images, emotions, insights.

Community Service Organisations. Secondly, as for staff, Board members should be welcomed into the myth and culture of an organisation, and then continually reminded of this myth in ways that inspire and guide.

Board members are typically busy people who, while generous with their time, do not want their time wasted. Board members typically bring a range of skills but share a commitment to the good governance and growth of an organisation. Some Board members may have strong connections with the earlier culture and identity of an organisation, and some may come from place outside or related to this culture, but with a strong sense of the needs of society and service development. Many will bring elements of both sets of gifts.

The ordinary workings of a Board should include attention to culture and identity. Where these matters need extra attention, however, it would be appropriate to provide Board members with appropriate materials and to have a longer guided discussion. Such a discussion would aim at hearing concerns, clarifying issues and setting directions.

Given the importance of using expertise efficiently, it may be appropriate to offer such an opportunity to several Boards. The scale should not be so large, however, that the exercise ends up with more listening than speaking.

2. How do we operationalise 'Catholic culture and identity' in our own organisations?

Our earlier discussion paper concluded that Catholic culture and identity are to be created rather than to be held on to, and that their creation comes through four stages:

1. keeping alive the memories of our founders
2. continuing a dialogue with other elements in the Church about the Christian mission and our part in it
3. getting on with our work and our way of working: professional and compassionate, but also prophetic and loving, promoting hope and seeking justice
4. learning a new language and new rituals in partnership with those who work with us and those we work with.

2.1 Keeping alive the memories of our founders

Board members and staff members should be given an opportunity to enter into the myth of the founders. The provision of such opportunities is usually done in partnership with the founding religious congregations. In the early years of lay involvement in congregational works, there was a tendency to make the lay people like the religious, with a focus on 'lives of saints' and retreats and observance of religious rituals. In more recent years, however,

most religious congregations have a sense of 'handing over' their heritage to the laity and a stronger focus on the 'myth' that needs to be carried forward. Many organisations have a 'director of mission' to assist in this. Ideally, however, the director or CEO of the organisation is a co-director of mission.

This task of 'keeping alive' the memories of our founders can be done well or done badly. It is certainly feasible: the founders were all extraordinary people in extraordinary times doing extraordinary works. Done badly, it is poorly supported, unresourced, full of superfluous words and images, uninspiring, confused, backward looking, irrelevant, exclusive. Done well, it is given high priority, well organised, engaging, forward-looking, relevant, inclusive, concise, inspiring.

2.2 Continuing a dialogue with other elements in the Church about the Christian mission and our part in it

This is chiefly a task for the Board, the CEO and the Director of Mission. There are two key elements to this task.

First, it is important to understand that a Catholic Community Service Organisation is a key part of the Church, but it does not embody the whole Church. It is not a parish. It is not a worshipping community as such.

Secondly, nonetheless, it plays a key role in the life of the Church: in Pope Benedict's recent writings, Catholic Community Services offer 'organised love': they are the place where the Church interacts with wider society; and they are the place where the laity have a primary role and particular responsibility. The famous 1970 Synod of Bishops proposed that 'action for justice is constitutive of the preaching of the Gospel'. Pope Benedict seems to be saying that 'organised love is constitutive of the preaching of the Gospel'.

These two points give parameters to this dialogue with other elements of the Church:

- Our way of being Catholic has to do with the mission of the laity, providing community services, and engaging with wider society
- Through our 'organised love' we are spreading the Gospel
- We have a legitimate place in the Church
- We need support and encouragement from the wider Catholic community, just as they can expect us to be people of hope and love and prophetic spirit.

It is worth noting that there is currently a lack of clarity about the role of Catholic community service organisations in the wider Church. This dialogue may help in achieving greater clarity, and this in turn may help in the development of new language and rituals (see 2.4 below).

Finally, in carrying out this dialogue, as well as a confident authority, a

fundamental humility is also required. This is because no religious congregation is promised an eternal place in the church. All 'unique' charisms of religious congregations ultimately come from the Holy Spirit and are united in the Holy Spirit. The ultimate future of our work, and the future of every other work in the Church, is not some separate identity, but part of the union of all things in the mystery of the divine.

2.3 Getting on with our work and our way of working: professional and compassionate, but also prophetic and loving, promoting hope and seeking justice

This is chiefly a task for managers and staff. Operationalising this task, however, entails many steps. For example:

- Recruitment: position advertisements, position descriptions, interview panels, induction, probation, supervision are all of absolute importance, and far too often overlooked. It is a truism that people recruit in their own image.... Once a particular appointment is made, all subsequent dependent appointments will more than likely replicate the original appointment, with less or more attention to culture and identity. Workplaces generally end up reflecting – or reacting to – the culture and identity of the manager.
- Workplace: establishing a culture that is both professional and personal is both professional and personal; participatory more than prescriptive; encouraging a good work-place community; with a spirit of inclusion, affirmation, hope, compassion, justice....
- Services: are they people-centred? do they carry hope and compassion? do they respect dignity and nourish spirit? do they challenge injustice and exploitation?
- Communications: do our communications – directives, meetings, emails, letterheads, websites, memos – promote or cut across our espoused culture and identity? Are our communications (verbal and non-verbal) respectful, personal, attentive, affirming....?

2.4 Learning a new language and new rituals in partnership with those who work with us and those we work with

This is the real challenge. Usually a single inspiring leader provides a community or an organisation with new language and new ways of doing things, and this was certainly the case with the founders of religious congregations.

We are currently in an interim situation, where the leadership of the work has been handed over to a new generation...but it has not yet been grasped and taken forward by the new generation.

Nonetheless, the demand for a new language and new life-giving rituals is already present, and there is a desire to find new ways to carry forward these gifts of culture and identity.

This is a work for board members and staff and people engaged in our services, but ultimately a responsibility of the Board. While the exercise draws on marketing and communication skills, it goes beyond marketing. These exercises run the risk of producing banal and clichéd compromises drawn up by well-meaning but ungrounded committees. What is really needed is leadership, in the best sense of the word.

Good leadership, however, includes searching and listening, and the starting point for this exercise should be something like a values-clarification exercise – perhaps partly done on-line – that helps people find that still small voice inside their hearts that prompts a new language and shapes a new ritual. The exercise should also be partly guided by the dialogue with other elements in the Church (noted above in 2.20).

This exercise will not necessarily be completely successful the first time around, nor perhaps the second time around. We may need to understand more about what it is that is being asked of us, and need further guidance.

It may be wise to leave this exercise until some of the other steps have been taken.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to offer a plan of actions and stages to address questions of culture and identity in Catholic Community Service Organisations. The following steps are proposed:

1. Board members from auspicing organizations to be invited to a planning day to get consensus on significance and development of identity and culture
2. Recruitment, induction and ongoing development of board and staff to be checked in terms of myth, content and priority
3. Boards to establish an avenue of dialogue with other elements in the Church, with regular reporting
4. Appraisals and service reviews to include attention to workplace as a place of community, hope, inclusion,
5. Organisations to review communications and possibly develop their stories/ symbols/ language/ rituals.