

Catholic Social Services Victoria
Annual Dinner
8 August 2014

LEADERSHIP IN A TIME OF CHALLENGE AND CHANGE

I acknowledge the ancestors and the past and present Aboriginal elders of this land on which we gather and pay my respects to the members of the Kulin Nation.

I also pay my respects to the elders in our community of faithful past and present – and particularly the women and men who have preceded us in similarly challenging times and who continue to inspire us. We should remain mindful of them and the legacy they left us. For me, one of those is Sr. Sheila Sawle rsm, who along with Sr. Maura Kelleher rsm, the then Congregation leader - handed to me the baton of leadership of the PJP MercyCare WA, in 2002. Sheila died in 2006 and her leadership legacy remains as that of a visionary whose invitation was always to *'Listen to the Spirit'*. I hope the Spirit is with us tonight as we ponder awhile.

Thank you for inviting me to share some thoughts with you about leadership and the challenges we face as leaders today. Having just finished reading *'Listening, Learning and Leading'* I am humbled by your invitation and wonder if there is anything I could possibly add. I am also aware this is a dinner talk and there is a tradition of frivolity at many dinner speeches. With apologies, I intend to be serious – in part because frivolity does not sit easily with this topic at this time.

My guess is that as a new – albeit elderly - kid on the national Catholic Social Services scene from that city a little beyond the end of the Nullarbor, I have been invited to speak so you can get a sense of where I stand and what this might mean for CSSA. Perhaps also, you are interested in what the Truth Justice and Healing Council is meaning for me and for us. I hope I can give you at least a bit of something to assist you to understand my thoughts on at least some of this. In doing so I intend to talk honestly of the personal challenges we face in our various forms of leadership in the church today.

Perhaps, a slight deviation to locate me in our broader Catholic world and to help you understand where my feet are planted. I was born far to the west and over the water from Perth, in Uganda where my parents worked with what was then known as a leper colony. My parents were dedicated 'converts' to Catholicism who met as Catholic refugee workers on a UN boat to the Middle East after the war. In Africa we were reared in a family driven by a duty to racial justice and we were nurtured by men and women in an African culture that had embraced Catholicism within a powerful animistic culture that spoke to a cosmic celebration of life. We moved through Africa, to the UK and then to Australia. As the eldest daughter in a family of eight, six of whom were boys, I learned two things – one was to take charge (my siblings might say to be bossy), the other was to know how to engage with men as equals (a great lesson for me to work in the male hierarchical world that is often said to typify our faith).

After that slight deviation into the personal, a rider. I am only just beginning to get a handle on CSSA - the organisation I have the privilege of chairing. I am still learning about its structure, its arms and legs, its roommates and its history. I acknowledge the remarkable leadership of CSSA by Fr Joe Caddy over the years and that of the board, CEOs and office

staff whose dedication is so tangible. The beginning perspective I have is that we are all on the cusp of new thinking as we negotiate our presence as faith based services amongst those of faith and no faith in a fragmented policy arena and with imperatives that challenge us to work together as never before and in ways that are more transparent and accountable than ever before. The Royal Commission sits in our midst as a potent and tragic signal of our failures on a number of these counts and as a stimulus to work differently to both heal the terrible hurt of so many and to do things differently. How we work together now and into the future will determine the outcome of these troubled times.

I acknowledge every one of you as a leader in our community of faith and service – all of you are warriors for justice and peace in a world that appears ambivalent about peace and equality and yet a world in which there is much human compassion intermixed with considerable amounts of moral oblivion. The work you try, and do accomplish – that you do alongside so many people from diverse faiths and beliefs and in the face of complex difficulties and political vagaries is to be celebrated! A beacon of hope for me is the light from people of faith who are distinguished by their care about humanity and their unflinching support for the dignity of the individual, the poor, the frail, the distressed and the marginalised when so many public policy drivers seem to focus on blame, punishment and retribution.

Whilst we might share powerful values and a dedication to people informed by our Catholic faith, and many of you have qualifications in theology, leadership and management amongst others, what leadership means to each of us in Catholic social services and associated services will be nuanced by our own personal reflections and experiences in life and leadership, by how our consciousness of self, our own interest in and capacity for discernment – and importantly by how we manage the shadow sides of our lives.

It will be clear to you already that in talking with you tonight I do not take the simple view of the topic '*Leadership in Times of Challenge and Change*' to be that of suggesting what we all ought to be doing in the light of current policy challenges. If I did take that road I might simply share with you the obvious – how important it is to fight for what is right and just; how we live in dire times; that we need to persevere and have strength; that we must keep fighting together for the marginalised and poor. There are sufficient soothsayers out there in media land who spell out their simplistic policy solutions and there are many persons amongst you in this room who are far more knowledgeable than I am about the deeply human problems and difficulties that accompany the lives of those we serve and the ways we need to work differently.

All of this is as it is – but there is more to what is important in leadership than what we should do about the public policy problems out there. For me the big question is in the how rather than in the what! Whatever we do now, whatever we say, however we lead, we are doing so in a world in which important leaders are seen to have failed. Some have called this a time of leadership crisis. There should be absolutely no doubt in the minds of all of us in our Church that we have a crisis of some magnitude in our midst. This is a crisis in our living community and in the Church we cherish. It is a time when we are required to be thoughtful leaders – to own up, fess up and embrace our failings together.

As we bear witness to the very public failure of our Church to protect children, arguably by, instead protecting itself, we also bear witness to the fact that most of the major institutions

in our country – including the political ones – are seen to have failed in their leadership. Our big and little institutions are being seen as places where there is relentless violence, human frailty, greed and self-interest. Who and what can people trust? The credibility of many of our institutions is now tarnished and unarguably people live in worlds of confusion – the churches, the defence forces, the entertainment industry, sporting clubs, even the family are seen as failing (as I write this there is a call for a Royal Commission into the family because of the violence therein).

It is apparent that – yet again - we are in a time when the authenticity of leaders and leadership is more than ever vital. It has always been so of course – and yet we now find ourselves re-learning what we thought we knew! How do we as a Church retain and regain trust in our own leadership and convey trustworthiness in a world reeling in the face of leadership failure? Can we help lead into a new future in which human dignity is an actuality we realise as we care for and protect children and all the vulnerable? How have we understood and managed the power differentials that must be mediated in order to enable our people and communities to flourish? How do we understand them now? And what lessons are we learning about how to do things differently? Is it possible to be honest and to deal with the power imbalances that, despite the best will of so many good people and the architects of Vatican II, seem to pervade the culture of Church at a local and an international level?

We have no choice. We must accept the challenges and most importantly we need to do so together and, whilst celebrating the diverse ways we are in the world, we must forego the divisions that seem to be a hallmark of some of the workings of our Church.

It has taken me many years to put some understanding around the fact that leadership is not an intellectual activity. Whilst I was reared with a passion for justice in my family, amongst Dominicans and by Presentation Sisters, I retreated early to an intellectualism that saw me finding solutions in books. It was the Sisters of Mercy and so many inspirational colleagues at MercyCare and the readings and reflections that accompanied our MercyCare formation journey that drove home the awareness of what leadership really requires.

In the late 90s a Quaker colleague introduced us to the wonderful work on Servant Leadership by Robert Greenleaf. Many of you know this work. Whilst Greenleaf was a secular leader, his writings are prophetic and are resonant of so much that we know from our own Jesus story. Jesus was a leader with humble earthly origins. Servant leadership provides an ethical perspective on leadership that identifies key moral behaviors that leaders must demonstrate in order to lead in ways that grow themselves and the people they serve. Greenleaf's prophetic work is as relevant today as ever it was. One of his observations I recount in the light of our cogitations this evening:

“If one is a servant, either leader of follower, one is always searching, listening, expecting that a better wheel for these times is in the making. It may emerge any day. Anyone may find it from personal experience. I am hopeful.”

However it was Chris Lowney, who is known to most of you and has a chapter in your recent book, who provided the next lot of building blocks and ones that I believe are so essential for us to re-visit as leaders now as we face current challenges. These are the points he made some years ago when he shared some time with us are familiar:

1. The leadership abilities people value have deeply spiritual qualities
2. Humility is misplaced when we think of ourselves. We are the leaders and we must dispense with the stereotype of leadership that sits at the head of business, economics, sport etc.
3. "You must love those you lead before you can be an effective leader"(attributed to an American general). Our claim to leadership is not in our status but in what we do with it.
4. Abdicating upward is what we tend to do at times of major change but leadership must be encouraged at all levels of the organization. "It is how people behave that makes the difference to success and health of an organisation - not the balance sheet."

Lowney provided these four skills for leadership:

1. *Heroism*: which is not just in extraordinary achievements. It is in the small things. A lifetime of dedicated and high quality work. When teams of people get over themselves and appreciate they are part of something bigger than themselves
2. *Self-awareness*
Rising stars often fade out when all they have to do is one particular thing. We need people who have judgement and courage rather than simple mastery of skills. We need learning agility. We need to make a deep investment in knowing ourselves - even those with no faith tradition need moments in the day to figure something for themselves.
3. *Ingenuity*
Essential in order to manage the changes. Change openness does not mean knowing the facts but being open to change. "When we have a major change in life we need to make ourselves free" (St Ignatius). We need to be free enough and detached enough to be able to say "we are part of something new together".
4. *Love*
Love manifests itself in deeds not words. What do we owe other human beings just because we share a common humanity? "A company is the group with whom you break bread"

Some additional comments I wrote down at the time Chris shared his thoughts with us:

1. "We must tap into the leadership legacy (of our institutions) as it has to come from a deeply spiritual place."
2. In talking of the women and men who led our Catholic social services, he said "They pulled it off because of their courage."
3. "We need to get comfortable with the reality of being uncomfortable"
4. "We must be role models for our teams - someone who leaves you feeling good"
5. "Regularly checking in with yourself" is imperative in leadership
6. "We must also value what needs to remain and not change"
7. Saying things in a faith neutral way is essential so those who share a particular faith and those who don't can all feel valued – we must ensure our fellow workers do not feel they are being proselytised.
8. At the end of the day, a lot goes to the question of 'ultimate meaning'.

Where does this lead us?

I love the words attributed to St Clare – an inspirational leader and one of the first followers of St Francis of Assisi.

"In finding our way in the world we must live consciously; and be prophets in the way we live our lives."

And the more recent words of Nancy Schrek, now heading up the LCWR:

"Great mysteries are revealed to us in darkness," and "Night is not necessarily a bad thing."

In many respects we are in a time of new darkness as we courageously own our failures and find new ways of being both as a Church and as servants and leaders of our Church. And the darkness will be followed by a new light! We are finding light and new vistas in a world besieged by secularity and fear where we need to listen to the prophets in our lives and be the prophets we are born to be. We do so in a world where people who have been reared in our church can make such profound and provocative statement as that used to describe Penny Chapman's view of her church in a recent weekend supplement: "She has left her Catholicism behind but not the Church. She has a deep love of the possibilities of the institution".

These words are resonant of so many I hear from friends and colleagues who remain 'faithful' but disconnected from our faith – but less so from our ministries.

As we do our work that capitalises on the possibilities of our faith I suggest three out of an infinite variety of ways we might travel in our leadership individually and together:

1. Wisdom and discernment

Solomon is our quintessential guide to leadership and recently in our readings for Mass we were invited to reflect on his quest as outlined in 1 Kings. Solomon asks for wisdom in leadership and because he seeks this above all else, he is gifted with "discerning judgement" in the form of a heart that is "wise and shrewd." Wisdom requires self-reflection that assists us to be shrewd.

Confucius is said to have said: "By three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest." Self-reflection takes space and time and the ability to share with each other. Wisdom requires honesty and openness. Arguably, much of our wisdom in recent months is emerging from the bitterness and the poignancy of our experiences of the injustices that have accompanied the journey of our Church and the pain of those who have suffered and continue to suffer.

A beacon of hope for me has been the opportunity to bear witness to the honesty, pain and suffering that we confront as Christ's faithful – clergy and lay – as we in the Truth, Justice and Healing Council, deal with the process and outcomes of the Royal Commission. I had not dared to think, but continued to hope, that senior elders and leaders amongst our clergy and remarkable lay leaders amongst the faithful could sit together with such humility and fortitude and bear witness to the suffering and confront the failures of our Church the way we have done with the Truth, Justice and Healing Council. It has been immeasurably tough for everyone – but certainly not even remotely close to the toughness experienced by those who have suffered from abuse.

The TJHC may represent a small step but it is in my mind, a big one. Our Church in Australia and internationally will never be the same again. How we manage to do things differently and with humility and with the utmost compassion for all those who have been harmed, will be a test of our spiritual heart, our true journey with Jesus and our capacity for true and honest discernment. I recall the words of Morris West in his 'biography': "Institutional power distances men [and women] from their own humanity." Together, we must with discernment and fearlessness, challenge any institutional power that undermines the work of the Spirit in our Church.

And we cannot move forward as a Church by simply capitulating to the oft stated position that all we face is a clerical problem – that the power differentials sit between the clergy and the lay faithful, or, to be blunt, that the clergy needs to sort out the problem. We are one Church. There are multiple identities and ways of expressing our faith in our Church. These have been most useful and have historically given the faithful a way of connecting to a charism or a cause. With some hesitancy I suggest some of the divisions may now represent something that divides us when we need to work together! How we understand and share responsibility and power lies in the hands of all of us – and particularly with us all as leaders here.

2. The acceptance of paradox

I am a follower of Richard Rohr's daily meditations at the Centre for Action and Contemplation and most recently have been inspired by his attention to paradox which he describes as the ability to live with contradictions without making them mutually exclusive, realizing they can be both/and instead of either/or. Rohr talks about the importance of moving beyond the dualistic thinking embedded in so much contemporary analysis. In so doing he invites us all to enter the uncomfortable realm of being present with uncertainty and to resist simplicity in order to find another way forward. "It is a great mistake to try to eliminate resistance. Rather, you have to work with it, weave it, honour its presence— because what is going to come into birth is not what you want or expect. It is going to be completely new and surprising.

What a vista!

Rohr asks how we can open ourselves to the third, reconciling energy that allows a new, fourth thing to arise? Commenting on the work of his colleague, Cynthia Bourgeault, he suggests that most humans in our normal state of consciousness are "third-force blind." We are stuck in dualistic ways of thinking, unable to see a mediating possibility. He argues that while we "can't of ourselves deal with paradox creatively, by practicing contemplation we can cultivate the awareness and spaciousness that allows new, unexpected arisings. "This principle states that in any new arising, anything that comes into being at any level, from the quantum to the cosmic, at whatever scale and in whatever domain—physical, physiological, or spiritual—is the result of the intertwining of three independent strands: affirming, denying, and reconciling. Note that reconciling is not the synthesis, but a mediating principle between the other two. This is a ternary, not a binary, system. Instead of paired opposites, we have the interplay of three energies that in turn creates a whole new realm of possibility."

How vital this seems today when we are needing to resolve the apparent paradoxes involved in the findings of the Royal Commission and so much else around us – including the paradoxes so evident in our relationship with governments that present binary options such as entitled and unentitled! Overpoweringly, we need to find a way through the paradox of the dyadic thinking in our Church – the clergy and the laity. We are one and yet we are entrenched in our dualistic spaces that keep us divided. Many people talk about there being two churches – the clerical church and the 'faithful'. There is a "whole new realm of possibility" for the church on earth if we can think ternary not binary. Vatican II was just the beginning.

3. Humour

Humour, as is said so often is important, healthy and necessary. It is particularly so “when the work we propose to accomplish is remaking our world into a more just and compassionate place, which can be overwhelming.” What an ambitious, crazy and important task!

We must take this work we do seriously but not so seriously that we lose perspective and the capacity for balance. Our Pope Francis portrays this need for balance and humour so well to the world – not just in his comic strip but in the way he simplifies the immensity of the story of Jesus.

Alongside the need for humour is care for the self. We are so used to caring for others and hospitality is at the core of that care. Perhaps if we cared more for the needs of the carers and all of you as leaders and carers we might be in less trouble today. Many amongst us as leaders lead very lonely lives! How can we be expected to lead and to care if we are not also recipients of care?

So, humour and self-care aplenty!

Finally:

So much more I can say and so much to learn from all of you. I look forward to meeting many of you over the coming months.

I thank my parents for their leadership, their wisdom and faith and their frailty that taught me so much – and my siblings and family who all remind me of the fragility of the humanity and the environment we share. I thank the many women and men of faith and of no faith who have been my leadership guides. I thank those who have entrusted me with a leadership I share with all of you. And I thank all of you all for this opportunity to share a little of the space we occupy as, collaboratively, with wisdom, self-reflection, and the engagement with paradox and with humour we embrace the challenges ahead on behalf of and with those who have much wisdom to share with us.

It is from our followers and those who have suffered most we can now learn most. We must now be led by those who have suffered and to be servant leaders.

In finishing I recall the great wisdom of Sr. Sheila who used so often to bring us back to earth by saying “Remember we are all just stubby pencils in the hands of God”! From this stubby pencil and to all of you as stubby pencils I say thank you and good night.

Maria Harries
(Chairperson CSSA)