

# DO THE STAFF NEED TO KNOW WHAT WE BELIEVE?

Beth R. Crisp

IT HAS BEEN PROPOSED that ‘welfare services constitute a site where the sacred and secular interact’.<sup>1</sup> This reflects the fact that the majority of non-governmental organizations across the world which primarily exist to provide humanitarian services have a faith basis or religious identity.<sup>2</sup> This is certainly true in Australia, where I live and work: 23 of the top 25 Australian charities in terms of annual income, several of which employ hundreds of staff, are associated with Christian Churches.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, non-governmental organizations provide at least half of all welfare services in Australia, with Christian Churches being central to this provision.<sup>4</sup> Many of these services receive much, if not all, of their funding from the state, which brings the expectation that services will be provided for all members of the community, irrespective of their religious beliefs, rather than just for members of a particular religion. Hence, in recent years, many church-affiliated welfare organizations have been engaged in discussions as to how they might explore matters of spirituality with a diverse clientele but not risk losing funding through allegations that state funding is being used to procure converts.<sup>5</sup>

An equally significant issue, but one which has received far less attention in the social welfare literature, is that of how welfare organizations share their spirituality with their staff. Historically most welfare services funded and conducted by religious organizations were staffed by co-religionists

<sup>1</sup> Olav Helge Angell, ‘Sacred Welfare Agents in Secular Welfare Space: The Church of Norway in Drammen’, in *Welfare and Religion in 21st-Century Europe*, volume 1, *Configuring the Connections*, edited by Anders Bäckström and others (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 75.

<sup>2</sup> Alastair Ager and Joey Ager, ‘Faith and the Discourse of Secular Humanism’, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 24/3 (September 2011), 456–472, at 457, 466.

<sup>3</sup> Meredith Lake, *Faith in Action: HammondCare* (Sydney: U. of New South Wales P, 2013), 5.

<sup>4</sup> See Rose Melville and Catherine McDonald, ‘Faith-Based Organisations and Contemporary Welfare’, *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 41/1 (2006), 69–85, at 74–75; Shurlee Swain, ‘Welfare Work and Charitable Organisations’, in *Encyclopaedia of Religion in Australia*, edited by James Jupp (Melbourne: Cambridge UP, 2009), 687.

<sup>5</sup> See Beth R. Crisp, ‘Catholic Agencies: Making a Distinct Contribution to Australian Social Welfare Provision?’ *The Australasian Catholic Record*, 87/4 (2010), 440–451.

who were often clergy, religious or committed laypeople, all of whom might be expected to have an understanding of the spirituality that underpinned their work. However, in large church-affiliated welfare organizations with hundreds of employees, many of the staff do not share the religious beliefs or spirituality associated with their employers. In respect of Catholic social welfare organizations in Australia it has been observed that,

Our agencies now operate with a new workforce .... Importantly, in addition to being non-Catholic and non-practising, our workforce is less likely to have had the educational and cultural experiences that might engender some prior understanding of Catholic life and culture. In this context we cannot even assume that some of our very basic assumptions will immediately resonate in the lives of people who make up our workforce.<sup>6</sup>

In this context, I propose that any organization which identifies itself as Christian must be able to articulate its faith basis in a way that is meaningful to its key stakeholders, including staff.<sup>7</sup> Drawing on interviews with twenty Australian social workers, who are or have been employed in welfare agencies associated with a range of Christian traditions,<sup>8</sup> I first consider some common ways in which organizations express their spirituality to staff, and then propose how the framework of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius could be used to assist welfare organizations in articulating their faith basis to staff and other key stakeholders.

### **Organizational Practices**

For new staff, the first glimpses of how an organization expresses its beliefs often occur in the processes of staff recruitment. The fit between their values and those of the organization is typically tested in job interviews, and explicit discussion of religious beliefs and values is a factor that often distinguishes the employment process in church organizations from those of other welfare agencies.<sup>9</sup> In some welfare organizations it is believed that workers with a strong faith are more attuned to the needs of service users

<sup>6</sup> Frank Quinlan, 'Common Challenges for Health, Education and Social Services', in *Identity and Mission in Catholic Agencies*, edited by Neil Ormerod (Strathfield: St Paul's, 2008), 51.

<sup>7</sup> See also Helen Cameron, 'Typology of Religious Characteristics of Social Service and Educational Organizations and Programs: A European Response', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 33/1 (2004), 146–150, at 147.

<sup>8</sup> Further details of this research can be found in Beth R. Crisp, *Social Work and Faith-Based Organizations* (London: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> David Conradson, 'Values, Practices and Strategic Divestment: Christian Social Service Organisations in New Zealand', in *Landscapes of Voluntarism: New Spaces of Health, Welfare and Governance*, edited by Christine Milligan and David Conradson (Bristol: Policy, 2011), 158–160.

than non-believers.<sup>10</sup> In such organizations, not only are religious beliefs a requirement for appointment, staff may also be expected to participate in religious activities within the organization<sup>11</sup> and even to sign a statement of faith.<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere, it may be recognised that not all staff will share the same religious beliefs or outlook, but there may be expectations of a fit with the organization's values or mission statement,<sup>13</sup> and prospective employees may be asked to comment on the content of such documents at interview:

People are asked when we interview them, we always give them a mission statement and the values and so on, and say, 'Why have you applied to?' ... So they don't have to sign the dotted line and say they're going to church three times a month or whatever, but we do, they do need to feel like there is a fit between their own personal lifestyle and their own personal framework and how they view life, and the way that we work.<sup>14</sup>

Once they are employed, processes associated with the induction of new staff can provide another opportunity to discuss the religious beliefs and the spirituality that underpin the organization's existence. One way of maintaining a religious identity is to ensure that new staff and board members become familiar with the inspirational stories of the organization's founders and/or the religious tradition with which it is associated.<sup>15</sup> As a senior manager who often participated in induction events reflected, it is not just members of the organization's religious tradition who are inspired by the stories of founders:

I think people that come to work here, we have a mix of people from those who profess to be Christians to those who aren't and people who don't really care. But most of them can connect with the stories somehow and connect with the values that underpin those, the values of the founders. It's something that we hold quite dear in the organization.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ram A. Cnaan and Stephanie C. Boddie, 'Setting the Context: Assessing the Effectiveness of Faith-Based Social Services', *Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work*, 25/3-4 (2006), 5-18, at 14.

<sup>11</sup> See Lake, *Faith in Action*, 174-176, and elsewhere.

<sup>12</sup> Laura C. Thaut, 'The Role of Faith in Christian Faith-Based Humanitarian Agencies: Constructing the Taxonomy', *Voluntas*, 20/4 (2009), 319-350, at 342-343.

<sup>13</sup> Robin K. Rogers, 'Community Collaboration: Practices of Effective Collaboration as Reported by Three Urban Faith-Based Social Service Programs', *Social Work and Christianity*, 36/2 (2009), 326-345, at 341-342; Conradson, 'Values, Practices and Strategic Divestment', 158-160.

<sup>14</sup> Crisp, *Social Work*, 92.

<sup>15</sup> Jill Witma Sinha, 'Unintended Consequences of the Faith-Based Initiative: Organizational and Religious Identity within Faith-Based Human Service Organizations', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 42/3 (2013), 563-583, at 574-575.

<sup>16</sup> Crisp, *Social Work*, 93.

Recalling her own induction at another large church welfare agency, a social worker who did not regard herself as being religious recalled that:

Orientations are typically a really, really boring day. Really, really boring policies, procedures and everything like that whereas the [*organization*] one was fantastic where they actually explained how each part of it started and why it started and who the people were and what and that they were around during the feminist wave and all this stuff and how that had impacted and how it was during the depression that these things had started and that the different ministers had got together and said 'We need to help each other' and stuff and so that reminded you of why you were doing social work and why you were here.<sup>17</sup>

Many Christian organizations consider it important that, as well as connecting with a vision of the past, staff in some way connect with the wider faith community associated with the welfare provision. One way that this can occur involves having religious professionals, or other board members who represent the wider religious community, meet with new staff. Some organizations have regular worship services to which staff may be invited, although they are not necessarily expected to attend, chaplains who can provide support to staff and/or discussion of faith matters at various organizational forums. Organizations which employ non-Christians may nevertheless make efforts to ensure those staff do not feel excluded. For example, in one organization with which I have had some contact, meetings of staff often include a reflection on the values of the organization or its founders. As a non-Christian staff member explained, this approach was far more engaging than formal times of prayer, to which this person would have been unable to relate:

I loved the fact that we had reflection time ... here I am in a religious organization that's not of my own religion, but I felt incredibly connected, not to the actual faith, not to the religious side of it, but to the concept of spirituality.<sup>18</sup>

Some organizations have taken this idea further and have sought to provide staff with opportunities to gain deeper knowledge or insights into the religious ethos of the organization. In particular, such efforts often focus on staff involved in the leadership group who are setting and/or maintaining strategic directions, especially when there is an expectation that such individuals will have a well-developed grasp of the agency's religious roots.

<sup>17</sup> Crisp, *Social Work*, 93.

<sup>18</sup> Crisp, *Social Work*, 96–97.

In some Catholic welfare agencies this has included opportunities for individual staff to deepen their own faith by undertaking the Spiritual Exercises within their workplace,<sup>19</sup> but the time commitment required from both directors and persons taking the exercises will restrict this option to relatively small numbers of staff. It is not a realistic proposition to offer the Exercises to all staff when an organization has hundreds of employees.

### ***Using the Spiritual Exercises to Articulate Organizational Faith***

Welfare organizations may have limited resources, precluding them from offering the opportunity for large numbers of individual staff to experience the Spiritual Exercises. Arguably, however, some of the questions that the Exercises pose to individuals are also pertinent for contemporary Christian welfare organizations that are looking to articulate their faith. A selection of these are outlined here, in the awareness that the Exercises also generate other questions which may be just as relevant.

#### *A Question from Week 1: 'What Are We Doing for Christ?'*

Part-way through the First Week, the Exercises present a colloquy which raises the questions: 'What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I to do for Christ?' (Exx 53). If whatever we do for the poorest and most vulnerable members of the community we are doing for Christ (Matthew 25:40), arguably, for a Christian welfare organization, such questions raise issues about its mission. Indeed it has often been acknowledged:

Faith-based organizations have a set of characteristics that distinguish them from their secular counterparts. The language of faith, the religious idiom, frequently better reflects the cultural norms in which the poor and marginalized operate.<sup>20</sup>

This leads us to ask whether Christian welfare organizations are primarily called to be the 'mouthpiece of God' or 'the quiet voice of God'.<sup>21</sup> In other words, are they called actively to preach the gospel and seek converts or to be a presence through service provision?<sup>22</sup> Examples of both approaches are plentiful and suggest that there is no single answer to the questions of what I have done, am doing and will do for Christ. Where

<sup>19</sup> Mark Griffiths, 'Never Giving Up', *Province Express* (5 July 2011), available at <http://www.express.org.au/article.aspx?aeid=27117>, accessed 12 March 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Gerard Clarke and Michael Jennings, 'Introduction', in *Development, Civil Society and Faith-Based Organizations*, edited by Gerard Clarke and Michael Jennings (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 15.

<sup>21</sup> Anne Birgitta Pessi, 'The Church as a Place of Encounter: Communality and the Good Life in Finland', in *Welfare and Religion in 21st-Century Europe*, volume 1, 88.

<sup>22</sup> Swain, 'Welfare Work and Charitable Organisations', 689–690.

there is agreement is in the sense that Christian welfare organizations often have different values from their secular counterparts. As a non-Christian social worker noted about the Christian agency where she was employed:

The provision of welfare obviously sits well with their values, and they're not about profit, and they're not even so much about glory, so in some ways—welfare is hard, and in a time when it's all about economic rationalism and doing more with less, and efficiencies and all of that, which just make it harder, I think that they add value.<sup>23</sup>

Like Christ, Christian welfare organizations in many countries have developed reputations for innovative ways of addressing the problems of the people they encounter.<sup>24</sup> As one Australian social worker said to me: 'I think because we align our self with the gospel, we are called or compelled in a way, in a way to be responsive but also to be innovative ... to be open to possibility'. Another commented:

I don't know enough about other religions to know how much outreach they do, whether that's part of their faith or not. It's part of the Christian faith to be reaching out and giving, like, to whoever, rather than just looking after ourselves.<sup>25</sup>

However, while Christian staff may well view their work as an expression of their faith, this may reflect their expectations when they commenced employment rather than how the organization for which they work articulates its faith.

*A Question from Week 2: How Can We Be Companions to Christ?*

The Second Week of the Exercises poses the question as to how individuals can be companions to Christ (Exx 95), a question which could also be addressed to Christian welfare organizations. The companions of Christ in the Gospels were a motley bunch of individuals, many of whom were socially excluded and disregarded by the Establishment in the communities where they lived, but embraced by Jesus. Today we might argue that being a companion of Christ also involves having a deep respect for individuals, particularly those who are outsiders:

So I think it's around values, relationship; and if you've got the right values you enter into a relationship and it becomes embracing or a symbiotic relationship where you learn from the other .... I think we

<sup>23</sup> Crisp, *Social Work*, 31.

<sup>24</sup> Colin Holden and Richard Trembath, *Divine Discontent: The Brotherhood of St Laurence. A History* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2008), at 161–207, 266–274 and elsewhere.

<sup>25</sup> Crisp, *Social Work*, 33, 51.

as an agency, because of our values, would be open to embracing other cultures, other religions through the commonality rather than the difference between them.<sup>26</sup>

Some Christian welfare organizations model ways of working that acknowledge and respect different religious traditions, and may actively encourage staff from other religions to share key facets of their faith, such as religious festivals. Staff from a number of Christian welfare agencies in Australia made comments similar to the following:

... because we work with people of all faith backgrounds, we employ people of all faith backgrounds. So I would hope that it would mean that we could respect that in a much more authentic way than just a lip service sort of way. And I think that it does provide the opportunity to open up dialogues. So very rich dialogues would be here .... I would hope that's a more respectful way that because we come from a Christian perspective, that we can be much more respectful of people of other faiths than if we were not faith-based.<sup>27</sup>

One way in which companionship with Christ is expressed by many Christian welfare agencies is by providing services which focus on service users as people: as being much more than their material and physical needs.<sup>28</sup>



<sup>26</sup> Crisp, *Social Work*, 57.

<sup>27</sup> Crisp, *Social Work*, 54.

<sup>28</sup> Effie Fokas, 'The Greek Orthodox Church as an Agent of Welfare: The Case of Thiva and Livadeia', in *Churches in Europe as Agents of Welfare: England, Germany, France, Italy and Greece*, edited by Anne Birgitta Yeung, Ninna Edgardh Beckman and Per Pettersson (Uppsala: Institute for Diaconal and Social Studies, 2006), 230.

The dignity of human life is not an optional extra.<sup>29</sup> As Adam Dinham notes:

... dignity in religious terms, resides in human *being*, not human enterprise. According to faith traditions, it is human difference and variety which makes life interesting and valuable, and emphasizing markets over people, rather than people in markets, sets parameters which narrow the terms of celebration of the human life.<sup>30</sup>

In the situation where church organizations are receiving funds to provide services on behalf of the state, this often results in providing a much more holistic service:

I think we're doing a very good job of what the state needs to be done, caring for people, often in really difficult circumstances some of their troubles are just enormous; we help all kinds. I think we're just doing the work that the state needs to have done.<sup>31</sup>

Being a companion of Christ in this way is, however, the antithesis of some understandings of what it means to be Christian. In contrast to the organization in which he worked, one of the Australian social workers I interviewed was very critical of other Christian welfare organizations which placed a strong emphasis on trying to convert service users:

When I say 'they', it's a generalized statement, but a number of them struggle because they see their main purpose is to win souls for the kingdom and they fail to see what we can actually be Jesus to people who are just in need, without having to get them into Heaven or whatever.<sup>32</sup>

*A Question from Week 3: How Can We Be with Christ through the Pain of Crucifixion?*

The Third Week of the Exercises encourages individuals to enter into the sorrow of Christ through Holy Week to the point of crucifixion. David L. Fleming has proposed that the themes of the Third Week are best summarised by the word 'compassion'.<sup>33</sup> While Christian welfare organizations can have difficulties articulating what they are doing for

<sup>29</sup> See David Ranson, *The Hospitality of Ministry: Exercising Christian Ministry with a Trinitarian Heart* (Strathfield: St Paul's, 2012), 62–71.

<sup>30</sup> Adam Dinham, *Faith and Social Capital after the Debt Crisis* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 94–95.

<sup>31</sup> Crisp, *Social Work*, 37.

<sup>32</sup> Crisp, *Social Work*, 63.

<sup>33</sup> David L. Fleming, *Like the Lightning: The Dynamics of the Ignatian Exercises* (Saint Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2004), 25.

Christ and how they act as his companions, compassion is typically a central tenet and a concept that welfare organizations can articulate:

I think the Church, to their credit, and most of the Christian churches, if you look at most of the big care organizations around, and welfare organizations around Victoria and Australia they have been started by churches, and I think they've grown up out of people who have had that concept and that vision of, God wants to sit with the poor and if he wants to sit with people who are hurting ....<sup>34</sup>

Christian organizations are often among the most prominent voices in the community defending the needs of those who are excluded, such as the poor, the homeless, and refugees and asylum seekers.<sup>35</sup> This deep sense of compassion has often resulted in church organizations becoming the voice of social conscience within the wider community, particularly in economically difficult periods.<sup>36</sup> Expressing compassion for the most vulnerable and marginalised members of the community can have its costs, ranging from criticism to violent attacks.<sup>37</sup> In the case of welfare agencies that receive state funding, the silencing tends to be more subtle, playing on the fear of organizations losing their funding.<sup>38</sup> However, many refuse to be silenced and will make considerable efforts to be a beacon of compassion in otherwise seemingly uncaring communities:

I think [*organization*] is known as an organization that will go the extra mile .... I think we have some sort of pride in that. Some pride in the agency that we work with the hardest ones, the ones others have given up on and keep on trying to break through with the person's problems.<sup>39</sup>

#### *A Question from Week 4: How Can We Witness to Christ's Resurrection?*

In a welfare setting, a key way of witnessing to Christ's resurrection is not giving in to the seeming hopelessness of difficult situations, but making the most of what potential there is for service users. A social worker commented:

<sup>34</sup> Crisp, *Social Work*, 32.

<sup>35</sup> See Joanna Ebear, Rick Csiernik and Michael Béchar, 'Furthering Parish Wellness: Including Social Work as Part of a Catholic Pastoral Team', *Social Work and Christianity*, 35/2 (2008), 179–186; Conradson, 'Values, Practices and Strategic Divestment', 153; Sarah Cemlyn and Linda Briskman, 'Asylum, Children's Rights and Social Work', *Child and Family Social Work*, 8/3 (2003), 163–178, at 174–178.

<sup>36</sup> Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 265.

<sup>37</sup> Damaris Seleina Parsitau, 'The Role of Faith and Faith-based Organizations among Internally Displaced Persons in Kenya', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 24/3 (September 2011), 493–512, at 500–503.

<sup>38</sup> Fred Glennon, 'Blessed Be the Ties That Bind? The Challenge of Charitable Choice to Moral Obligation', *Journal of Church and State*, 42/4 (2000), 825–843.

<sup>39</sup> Crisp, *Social Work*, 69.

Because we are a faith-based agency, we have a greater capacity to be with people who are suffering and to stay with situations, and that's something I feel very strongly about [*organization*], that you don't write people off. You stay there and you try and find a way and I think ... there's not much that fusses us. I think that's something to do with respect and tolerance and valuing a diversity of people. Something about the faith of the organization gives you a greater repertoire to deal with the experience of suffering in another person's life. So it doesn't mean you sort of sit there and glow in their discomfort, but you're not frightened by it.<sup>40</sup>

However as a manager in another Christian welfare organization reflected, in difficult situations Christian organizations may be tempted to act no differently from their secular counterparts and effectively diminish any resurrection hope:

I would hope we are a better organization, but being Catholic doesn't make us a better organization; it's how the staff put in practice their values, I think. I've had an argument with staff this week over it and I think they became very bureaucratic .... Somebody who's not one of our clients in one of our programmes became disturbed, the police came, the door was broken down. So they start thinking, as administrators of the building, it's best if we get rid of this bloke, he's caused this damage. And so I'm saying, and my senior manager's saying to them, 'Hang on, why are you getting rid of him? Is it to make your life easier or is it—how does that fit with our mission?'<sup>41</sup>

### **Keeping the Faith**

I have suggested here how Christian welfare agencies could use questions emerging from the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius to help them articulate their faith basis. This may seem ironic, given that Ignatius regarded actions as more important than words (Exx 230). However, the question arises as to whether an organization which is unable to articulate its faith basis to its staff will ultimately be able to retain its Christian identity.<sup>42</sup> One of the social workers I interviewed recognised this potential in his own organization having observed it in other church-affiliated organizations:

My one fear for it would be that it would lose its spirit, its ethos. I don't think it has, I think it's kept it, but I'm not sure what it needs to do to in order to make sure it does keep it. I know places that have lost it ... I've talked to people in other places, they say, 'oh it's

<sup>40</sup> Unpublished research interview, conducted by the author.

<sup>41</sup> Unpublished research interview, conducted by the author.

<sup>42</sup> See Thaut, 'The Role of Faith', 334–335.

just changed since this has happened'. They get really down about losing that spirit.<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, it may be more, rather than less, important that church welfare organizations which employ non-Christians are able to articulate their beliefs and the implications of these for welfare practice than it is for agencies where all staff share a common commitment to the vision of the religious founders of organization.<sup>44</sup> As many welfare agencies founded by religious groups have discovered, once links with the founders are no longer present and the staff group becomes increasingly diverse, maintaining the initial vision, or aspects of it that are still relevant, can become an ongoing challenge.<sup>45</sup> While there are some welfare organizations that have deliberately sought to break free of their religious roots, there are others in which the faith connection has simply been lost. The affiliation between such welfare agencies and the Churches that sponsor them can become quite tenuous, such that a few of the people interviewed for my research were not really sure if they worked in a church welfare organization or not.

Certainly there are other questions than those I have identified which could be used by organizations that are seeking to articulate their Christian identity,<sup>46</sup> but the issue of *how* organizations are articulating their faith is secondary to that of *whether* they are articulating their faith.<sup>47</sup> If they are, organizations need to consider how they will inform their staff about the beliefs that underpin the organization. Perhaps it is considered that staff do not need to know, but if they are expected at least to have an awareness of these beliefs, processes need to be established to ensure that they are informed, because otherwise experience would suggest that it just might not happen on its own.

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<sup>43</sup> Crisp, *Social Work*, 143.

<sup>44</sup> Gregory N. P. Konz and Francis X. Ryan, 'Maintaining an Organizational Spirituality: No Easy Task', *Journal of Organizational Change*, 12/3 (1999), 200–210.

<sup>45</sup> See Holden and Trembath, *Divine Discontent*, 283–289; Lake, *Faith in Action*, 336–346 and elsewhere.

<sup>46</sup> See Cameron, 'Typology of Religious Characteristics', 147.

<sup>47</sup> Konz and Ryan, 'Maintaining an Organizational Spirituality', 203.