

# Spirituality, leadership and social service in the church

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The work of Catholic social service agencies should be celebrated within the church. Its peak body, Catholic Social Services Australia (CSSA), which has been savagely cut recently, has successfully matched wits with governments for over sixty years and its member agencies continue to serve the community selflessly.



Yet it is a success story not widely enough recognized and most Catholics probably still do not comprehend just how much its highly professional caring workforce are operating on the edges of society. Some parts of its mission would shock the average Catholic in their rawness and in the personally threatening nature of its challenges. Who would have thought that vicarious trauma, the absorption by staff of the trauma of those being served, is a major problem among the social services workforce? Working in this field takes empathy, understanding and courage

despite its immense personal and organisational rewards and blessings. They are always client focused.

Learning to address such trauma is at the heart of a fine little book, *Spirituality, Leadership and Sustaining a Caring Workforce*, edited by Dr Brenton Prosser, a former CSSA director of research (Connor Court Publishing 2020). At its most practical it means to show how to retain and nurture staff and how to celebrate the benefits of spirituality. While it may be primarily directed towards, and generated by, leaders and staff in social services and, more broadly those in the caring professions, it should resonate with a much broader audience, including all Catholics concerned about their church. CSSA CEO, Dr Ursula Stephens, argues cogently that: 'If we are burned out, crushed or dispirited, we cannot fulfil God's work'.

That truth is surely a metaphor for life today, including life in a church burdened by grief and shame over child sexual abuse and its cover up. It is not too much of a stretch to say that this discussion and its remedies could apply to the whole church. As Belinda Clarke and Kylie Burgess (p. 110) write:

'The question for us is not only how to connect people to the relevant and meaningful aspects of the Catholic tradition but how to do this in a manner that is inclusive, affirming and nurturing. If we do not get this part right, if how we do this excludes people, or it leads to judgement, then we demonstrate a lack of understanding of the human person, relationships and respect, and risk doing further damage. The Catholic tradition that we bring forward... needs to embody its theological worldview through fostering and supporting an environment of belonging, trust and positive relationships.'

Many of the themes explored in this book have both a particular and a general application. These include working through the idea of Catholic identity in a multicultural and secular age, seeking to accommodate professional and secular concepts, like stress, resilience and emotional labour, with religious terminology, the internal dynamics of Catholic agencies and the needs of their workers and clients, the inspirational and calming contribution of Indigenous spirituality, and the impact of government regulations on working life.

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The language used in all these contributions is accessible, while not dodging hard questions or dumbing down the discussion. It includes several conceptual discussions, like those of Prosser himself and Frank Brennan SJ as well as empirical studies, like those of Jonathan Louth from South Australia and Robyn Miller from MacKillop Family Services.

Louth draws on his study within Centacare Catholic Family Services. It is an empirical snapshot, based on a survey of frontline workers and follow-up interviews, of the impact of compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma on the social services workforce. Among its conclusions is that for emotional health and wellbeing staff and clients need their voices heard, both directly and through advocates. This need also applies to the wider church.

Miller, speaking as an agency CEO, explains the successful application of the Sanctuary Model in changing organisational culture from the coalface to the upper echelons in order to respond to vicarious trauma. The particular setting is the provision on a 24/7 basis of homelessness services and residential care for young people. The needs of the clients are complex and the mental health risks for staff are extraordinarily high. In addressing the goal of a safe environment built on respectful relationships the key values, according to Miller, are justice, hope, collaboration, compassion and respect.

Stick with this book when the concepts get tougher, just as social services staff hang in there in working with clients with complex needs. As Dr Stephens wisely reflects:

'Spirituality is idiosyncratic, it is individual, and it is personal — we come to it differently but ultimately it makes us richer, soothes us and has the capacity to calm our worried mind.' More still needs to be done in exploring these themes, and the year of the Plenary Council is a perfect time for the church to do so. The lessons of this book, such as learning from the science and taking professional advice, deepening and broadening our spirituality, and recognizing that tradition and modern society can learn from each other, apply widely.



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Main image: Two hands in geometric patterns (Tim Mossholder/Unsplash)

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