

CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS AUSTRALIA ASSEMBLY: 'Charism beyond Borders'

A few years ago now, when I was CEO of Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service, a social services agency in Melbourne in the Good Shepherd tradition, an impressive young woman, a social worker joined the team in one of our centres in the western suburbs.

I didn't know her very well but whenever I visited that particular centre, I was always impressed by the contribution she made to the sense of morale and wellbeing of the staff and I was assured that she was a first rate social worker. She was of Vietnamese cultural background and worked with the many Vietnamese families who lived in that quite poor area of the city.

After twelve months, she tendered her resignation to the great disappointment and sadness of her colleagues and her local Manager.

She told them all that for quite some time now she had been searching for her direction in life and this process of discernment had peaked during her time at Good Shepherd. The culture and environment at Good Shepherd had made a huge impact upon her. The clarity that staff had around the Mission and values of Good Shepherd and their capacity to make these values really come alive in their work – both the way they treated each other as well as the way they went about their work with the very disadvantaged young people and families in that part of Melbourne – had provided her with an environment which she said she had not encountered before. Being there had helped her clarify her direction and she was leaving to become a Buddhist Nun.

Some little while later, I happened to be at a function attended also by the Good Shepherd Sisters' Province Leader and I said to her: "I have some good news and some bad news for you: the good news is that we appear at long last to have produced a vocation. A young staff member wants to be a Nun. The bad news, before you get your hopes up, is that she is becoming a Buddhist Nun!"

It was said tongue in cheek, of course; we were thrilled for this young woman.

In the twenty or so years as CEO of Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service I believed firmly as I still do today as Mission Director, that the most important, the most central, the most crucial element of good leadership in organisations like ours is to ensure that we provide a framework which enables the charism to be expressed in the work that we do with the most vulnerable so that, through that work, the Mission of the Good Shepherd Himself can be achieved.

Creating, strengthening and nurturing that framework is a priority for leaders. The shaping and moulding of an organisation around its founding charism by knowing and articulating clearly the values, the heritage, the hallmarks of, in our case, Good Shepherd charism has to be the central component of leadership.

This in no way diminishes the other imperatives of good leadership – professionalism in service delivery, quality staff support provisions, excellent interpersonal skills, negotiating and networking skills and so on and so forth. It simply affirms a basic reality: that our services and organisations are no different from those provided by government or a myriad of other services if

they do not flow from and give expression to the charism.

I really believe that, because we worked hard at this at Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service, the young woman I mentioned discerned her vocation. Many others also found an attraction to and a desire to engage with Good Shepherd enabling them to express both their spirituality and thirst for social justice even though they wouldn't or couldn't identify this as being linked to the charism.

It shouldn't surprise us that people, especially young people, often alienated from institutional religious practice, look to the strong stories that we call 'charisms' to give their yearning for something more than just material reward a shape and purpose.

This is captured well, I think, in one of my favourite definitions of the role that the charism plays from the Assumptionist Claude Marechal who said:

“Charism gives structure, being and action...and involves
a story to enter,
a language to speak,
a group to which to belong, a way to pray,
a work to undertake, a face of God to see.”

If it's true that charism is a story we enter – a deep story within **the** deep story of the Gospel, it is also true that we each bring our own particular story as, indeed, I brought mine. Through a combination of getting to know the Good Shepherd Sisters individually, being invited very early on by the then Province Leader to take on an unexpected role which expressed great confidence in my capacities, being treated, in general, by the Sisters as an equal whilst at the same time becoming very familiar with Good Shepherd history and heritage including, of course, the life of the Foundress, I was willingly drawn into the Good Shepherd Story, my story merging with that story. Then, being invited to involvement in international Good Shepherd events – addressing the General Chapter in Angers in France, speaking at and attending Good Shepherd Asia-Pacific Assemblies and gatherings – sometimes as the only male- participating in Provincial chapters but always being warmly welcomed, embraced as a partner in mission. No pressure, just invitation!

Unsurprisingly, this Good Shepherd Story captured not just me but also my family who have very much been part of the highs and lows of building and developing the social services agency, Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service, and part of all the major Good Shepherd gatherings in Melbourne. Of our four children, only the eldest was born before I began working at Good Shepherd (and only the year before). They have only known me as a Good Shepherd person.

Over fifteen years ago now a member of the Congregational Leadership Team (the General Council) visited the Province from Rome. I asked if she would speak to our staff at the Agency – most staff had no contact with the international dimension of Good Shepherd. She spoke of her life and work, and then she told staff members (who were the usual great mixture of religions and no religion at all) that the Good Shepherd charism - to be a good shepherd to those around us - was a gift of the Spirit. But, she went on, this gift doesn't belong to the Sisters, it doesn't belong to the Church or to Christianity, it belongs to the whole world, “to you as well as to me.” Our role was to gently invite people to bring their own story to our Good Shepherd story and to let these stories shape each other.

We are familiar with this concept now, charism without borders. But, hearing this said for the first time fifteen or more years ago from our visitor from Rome had a stunning effect on me and on the staff and took us a monumental step forward in building that framework I talked about earlier, enabling us to embed Good Shepherd charism, our values and spirituality into the fabric of the organisation.

So, as Religious continue the journey handing over more and more responsibility to their lay partners in mission, it might be good to reflect on these points:

1. It can be a challenge to move from a position of lay partners as Sister's or Brother's little helpers to accepting that they really share the charism, indeed are co-responsible with you for the continuation of the Story into the future. How is that equality in co-responsibility expressed in your structures and your dealings with your Mission Partners?
2. Recruiting for Mission becomes critical. Lay leaders expected to take on responsibilities previously borne by Religious must be 'charism receptive', there must be cultural fit, close values alignment, a desire to know well the heritage, a capacity to articulate and identify with the deep, guiding values of the Order. What do you have in place to ensure that this really is central to your recruitment practices?

There is a huge role for Religious to be alert to uncovering the charism in surprising places and to mentor those Mission Partners who have 'caught' the charism and show a desire to enter more deeply into your Story. This is how my story became part of the great Good Shepherd Story – and how also, somewhere in the world, there is a young Buddhist Nun with a loving contemplative Good Shepherd heart who became part of the Story too!

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